i've known the warmth of your doorways

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by necrotic_bones, saltyreader

Summary

> “What was it, something about making sure I eat well? Guess we’re more alike than I’d thought, Dr. Lecter.”
>
> He finally returns said smile, yet deflects again, much like Will does, “Do we, now? Does that make us better friends, Will?”
>
> “Would it be childish of me to call you my best friend?” he asks quietly, as if he hopes Hannibal won’t hear.

Or, the one where Hannibal is Jack's go to consultant, he meets Will under completely different circumstances, and their mutual obsession may as well be written in the stars.

[will update infrequently whenever we decide, tags will be added as chapters are posted and may contain spoilers]

it will come back

Chapter Summary

I know who I am when I'm alone
I'm something else when I see you
You don't understand, you should never know
How easy you are to need
Don't let me in with no intention to keep me
Jesus Christ, don't be kind to me
Honey, don't feed me, I will come back

Chapter Notes

This fic is brought to you by our unhealthy obsession with gay middle aged criminals. This chapter in specifically is brought to you by my intense hatred of (and allergy to) any and all kinds of grasses and pollens. Also the headcanon that Will is a caffeine hound. -**Bones**

I had no thoughts except Hannibal being curious and a Creature™ when he puts his mind to it tbh but hey it is what is it, Hannibal always likes being in Will's general space. -**Salty**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will finds the little thing in the pre-dawn light of early morning, mostly because she was barking so loud that he could hear it from his trek down to his mailbox. It took him nearly two hours to find her, caught up in the kind of thorny, tangled bush that's certainly caught and nicked at her thin tail and delicate paws. She's a sad sight, too small for his liking and coat dull instead of the shine it should have. It takes him over twenty minutes for her to stop barking when he gets close, and Will has the niggling fear that the bush isn't the only thing keeping her in place.

He's not wrong. There's a wire snare caught tight around one of her hind legs and he can see how it digs into her skin. The poor thing bites at his hand when he tries to get a closer look. Will takes the hint and trundles home in the dim light of dawn. He returns, armed with jerky treats, wire cutters, and a burning anger at whoever set the illegal trap.

It leads him to sitting in front of the small jack russell, who eats chicken jerky from his hands happily but still won't let him get close to the trap. He mourns the lack of hands humans

have, because two isn't enough to get her out with both of them unscathed. He sighs and scratches her behind the ears, unsure of how to proceed.

The sound of footsteps slowly make their way towards Will from the side of the road before a gentle voice says, "Looks like you're in a bit of a bind. Need a hand?"

Will doesn't *startle*, per say, because he heard the man walking up to him. But the voice, sudden and loud in the quiet previously only interrupted by the dog's soft huffs as she licks at his fingers, still makes his heart jolt slightly. He looks up.

The man is tall, made taller still by the fact that Will is sitting in the brush and wild bluestem. He's also wearing a full three piece *suit*, despite this being the middle of nowhere, early morning, and a field absolutely full of six different grass pollens. His hair is silver in the blue light of morning and his face genial when Will glances over it before turning back to the terrier half in his lap. "Uh," he says eloquently, "technically she's the one in a bind. Snare."

"Hm. People can be needlessly cruel," the man says slowly walking closer so as to not startle the poor thing in Will's lap. "Would you prefer I cut the wire? She's already terribly fond of you, after all."

"Needlessly cruel," Will scoffs as he passes over the wire cutters with the hand that isn't soothing over the jack russell's velvety ears, "It's illegal to put traps on someone else's property, is what it is."

"Those can coexist, unfortunately." He grabs the wire cutters and crouches down without a care for his clothes. "Now, where would you like me to cut?"

Will studies the man's hands, broad and steady and nails carefully trimmed and manicured. They're steadier than his, at any rate; Will's hands are prone to a constant low grade tremor made worse when he's surrounded by more people. This stranger has nice hands- as nice as hands can be, anyways. He decides, "The lead. Unless you're a vet, you shouldn't cut the wire around her. It's too close to her skin, a nick could get infected."

"Does being a retired surgeon come close?" He tries to joke, shooting Will a playful smile before cutting the lead as he was told. The wire cuts away easily, releasing the terrier to his arms. "There we are. My car is not far, I could drive her to the nearest vet, if you'd like you're free to come along."

"Do you usually have patients who bite?" Will asks, releasing the dog's muzzle from his gentle hold and feeding her another slip of chicken jerky from the bag in his pocket. He pulls her into his arms, holding her injured leg still by the paw, and doesn't ask *Retired? You don't look old enough to be retired*, like he wants to. He doesn't know this man - doesn't *want* to, handsome as he may be - but he's smart enough to figure out that antagonizing strangers isn't the best way to get them to leave you alone.

"I don't live far from here," he deflects instead. The terrier barks loud next to his ear and Will winces at the sound. He clicks his tongue to get her attention and feeds her another treat; bribery is always the first step to training, he's realized. Looking back to the man, he focuses

on his ear, the starting curve of a strong jaw. He makes himself add on, “Thanks, but you don’t have to stop your drive through the middle of nowhere for me, uh for us.”

“Not anymore.” The stranger stands back up with an amused half-smile, regarding Will curiously, but not in the morbid way most people would when they wondered how his mind worked. "I was actually on my way home from work, driving here is better than the main streets, more quiet. I must insist on helping, however, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if anything happened."

Will’s been odd, been good at reading people to filth since he was a kid in the Deep South, and he knows politeness for politeness’ sake when he hears it. Maybe this man is just one of those who hold themselves to manners, who don’t necessarily *want* to do what they offer but they’ll do it and they won’t be unhappy about it because then they stick to their manners and morals. He could look the man in the face, let himself look properly, and probably pick out the answer.

But it’s only dawn, he’d managed no more than four hours of sleep last night, and he doesn’t feel like having to deal with the emotional taxation of looking someone in the eyes while he has an injured-and-occasionally-whimpering terrier in his arms.

He just says, “Well, if you insist,” instead.

"I'll get my car, then. Hannibal Lecter, by the way," the stranger, *Hannibal*, says, looking at the terrier in Will's arms with the faintest of warmth in his smile. True to his word, he comes back with a Bentley and the three of them shuffle back to Will's home. The taller man wastes no time in abandoning his suit jacket and rolling up his sleeves, with a steely concentration.

“Uh, I should warn you I have other dogs,” Will says when he unlocks his front door. He clicks his tongue as it swings open and he’s trained his dogs, because all five of them settle back down to wait quietly by the fireplace. He heads down a short hallway near the kitchen, nodding to Hannibal. “Mud room’s this way, should wash her before I call my vet.”

Hannibal arcs a brow at him but doesn't say anything, choosing to follow Will instead. "Very well trained," he comments genuinely, opening his arms. "Now, may I see the patient? The anatomy is largely the same when it comes to joints and bones, I'll be able to rule out any concerning injuries."

It's almost like he knows exactly what to say that would calm down the average person. It's too bad Will isn't exactly *average*.

“Dogs are easy,” Will says, eyes darting away from sharp brows and lips and cheekbones. He focuses on the man’s hands instead: steady, calloused, cared for. He considers it for a moment but gently sets the jack russell down on the counter next to the laundry sink, instead of in the *retired surgeon’s* hands. “Let me run some water to rinse her off first.”

A retired surgeon, on the way home from work and driving through Wolf Trap of all places, who happens to stop because he caught sight of Will trying to rescue a stray. Something about it prickles, brushes against his skin oddly. Like the first time a neurologist had asked to

study him with eyes that were near fever-bright. He had been 24, barely more than a rookie in New Orleans, and deeply unsettled.

But the last time he checked - last week, in a fit of paranoia - his full name and address wasn't anywhere on the internet. Not in conjunction with his empathy or *oddness*, at least. So Hannibal was probably safe, probably fine to be around, probably not a journalist or neurologist. Probably.

Hannibal, at least somewhat kindly, acquiesces and doesn't make a fuss. He *does* look around curiously, though, before settling on the dogs still waiting in the other room. "Are they all strays?" It's just a question, of course, but it still hits just a bit too close to his paranoia to entertain.

"No," he frowns, picking the skinny stray up again and lowering her into warm, but not hot, water. He should probably find a name for her; if he's keeping her, she'll need a name, and he's definitely keeping her. "Not anymore. They're mine now, obviously."

They became his and he became theirs the moment he brought them home. There just wasn't any other way for it. Will knows he has a thing for strays, but they stop being strays the moment he decides to help them.

The man gives a little hum, almost an approval. "They say those who save animals are the ones who see both the best and worse humanity has to offer. I applaud you for taking on such an arduous task."

Will glances at the curve of his lips, the high planes of Hannibal's cheeks. He thinks the man is being honest. But Grahams have never been good at taking compliments, so he shrugs and deflects, "I see the worst at work. I've never met a bad dog."

Hannibal gives a wry chuckle, crossing his arms comfortably. "I have to agree with you there. What most consider a *bad dog* is more often than not a scared creature, fighting for survival." He pauses as he watches Will's pack with definite affection.

Something preens in Will's chest, but he ignores it as he ducks his head to look away from Hannibal and back to the terrier. She's much calmer now that she isn't trapped, and small enough that now with the help of warm water and soap, he's able to wiggle the wire trap from her leg.

"Good girl," he coos, patting her dry. The small wound on her leg is barely bleeding, but- well, he doesn't see the point in not taking up the offer. He turns and gently plops an armful of clean, slightly damp dog into Hannibal's arms. "Here. You can look at her leg now."

Privately, he wonders how much dog fur will get over the man's clean suit pants with an asocial kind of glee.

Without hesitation and with almost practiced ease, Hannibal shuffles her until he has a gentle grasp of her injured leg. He shifts and bends it, feeling the bone and muscle with those wide, calloused hands, like this is nothing out of the ordinary. And then the moment is broken when

the terrier sneezes. With a small laugh, she's handed back to Will delicately. "The skin's grazed, but otherwise nothing torn or broken. She got very lucky."

Will shifts her until he holds the dog close to his chest like a small child, scratching her chest idly. "Mm, lucky. It'll be lucky if I figure out who laid that trap," he says under his breath.

There's a spare dog bed he keeps in the mud room, so he sets her down with a sigh, and gestures to lead Hannibal out. He'll have to introduce her to the others later, once everyone is more settled. It comes out flatter and less genuine than he means it to when he looks at the former surgeon's shoulder and says, "Thanks for uh, coming in and looking over her. You really didn't have to."

"Well, she met you, there must be some luck in that," Hannibal replies, following him out, and if Will knew better, he might think he's flirting. But that can't be, who would flirt with him. "And I don't seem to recall ever getting your name. Could I at least have that much as a reward before leaving?" The smile the taller man gives him is playful and amused, like he's not offended by Will's more monotone inflation.

He's pretty sure it would be rude to say *no*, considering the man helped him free the little terrier and followed him back home to make sure she was alright. But Will has never been sociable, and has been aware of the kind of attention that comes with him sometimes. A lot of people seem fascinated by his sheer existence, particularly in the academic field. Which, considering he *works* in academics, exceeds only being called "frustrating".

After a moment of silently staring at Hannibal's ear and debating, he sighs, "Will."

Hannibal grabs his coat and pulls it on before smiling at him. "See you around Will, I'm sure your new dog will recover wonderfully." He leaves with a small nod of his head, not waiting around for anything else any type of journalist would usually try to get their hands on after being anywhere near his home.

Will would know, he's met his fair share in his time. Turning away, he heads to prepare his newest dog to meet the rest. He thinks he'll name her Clover. *Lucky indeed*.

Hannibal knew, the moment he'd seen Will on that empty stretch of road, that he needed to know more. He's always prided himself on being able to figure out anything and anyone he wanted to. Coming back from a case and meeting Will? It has to be destiny.

That's why he stands in the family owned, worn down from years of clientele, coffee shop, looking at his watch every now and then as he lets the line thin down. It's not like he's in a rush to go see *Jack* of all people. The man gives him enough of a passive headache on a good day, he really couldn't wait to see the light fade from those jolly eyes one day.

He sighs wistfully, walking towards the end of the diminishing line with new ideas in mind. Maybe he could drop a body somewhere and watch Jack flounder around like the fool he is for the fun of it? And do what with the meat? He hasn't been in the mood for a feast in nearly a year and some change and now is not the time for it.

The chime over the door, a cliche little thing, really, rings and the little coffee shop's newest customer brings with him the smell of sun-warmed grass and dog fur. Right on time, Will weaves his way between chairs and tables into the short little line with ease. With familiarity. Anyone else would have called it fortunus, but Hannibal would rather say that Alana's… recommendation was right on time.

Will looks as ruffled and disconcerted by the existence of other people in this shop as he had when Hannibal had approached him and the trapped dog. He stared pointedly at his feet, at the menu, at walls and chairs and not at all at the other people milling about. That, too, was consistent with the man he had met in an empty field. Someone so willing to care for a stray, a mutt kicked to the wind, and yet so reticent at the same time.

How curious. How interesting.

Hannibal grabs a coffee before making his way to Will's table, making sure his steps are audible enough for him. "Will," he calls out, faking uncertainty. "It is you, isn't it?" And there's no mistaking it, Will looks like he would rather be anywhere than here, surrounded by people. It just makes him that much more interesting, that much more of a rarity that the cannibal has a penchant for picking up like strays.

How fitting.

Will looks up at him, sharp and surprised and not wholly *at* him, given his clear lack of fondness for eye contact. A pity. For a moment, the man looks like he might deny the question, only to blink. "Oh, uh, Doctor Lecter? Or is it Hannibal, since you're retired?"

It would be a rude question bordering on disrespect from anyone else, with the flat way it falls, if Hannibal couldn't see the confusion coloring the way his lips pull down into a frown.

"Ah, usually something I would let others choose, but for you, Hannibal is just fine, Will," he smiles pleasantly before pointing to the seat in front of the younger man. "May I sit?" He needs to get Alana a vacation somewhere to repay her for this.

"If you want to, I guess," Will says dubiously, as if he suspects he has ulterior motives. Of course, he *does* have ulterior motives, as he does in anything, but it's not as if Will knows that. "I've never seen you here before. Or in the area. You're distinctive."

Hannibal takes it as the compliment Will is clearly trying to cover up, feels himself preen a little, which is new. "Ah, I recently started working here this past month, my colleague gave me a recommendation for the best coffee around, considering." He knows there aren't many people in Quantico, most of them students and the others Jack's team, really, but he'll aim to be the most recognizable for Will. The most prized ally he could have here, even.

"I didn't think I'd run into you, quite a surprise, but very pleasant," he adds lightly, hoping to worm his way into Will's heart, or brain. Or general flesh.

"Well," the other man says consideringly, "it is. And no one questions you if you ask for a couple extra shots."

Hannibal wouldn't want to be discourteous, of course, but he thinks that his and Will's standard for a best or even *good* cup of coffee are staggeringly different. Particularly if the man is adding even more espresso to his drinks.

He takes a sip of his drink, resists the urge to scowl, and instead looks at the menu. "Any recommendations for food? Though I prefer cooking, I fear my… colleague gives me very little time to get ready with a proper meal in tow. I'm sure you understand how it is."

Will stares at him blankly for a long moment, closer to his face than before. There's an almost suddenness to the way he looks away, over to the menu and the counter. "Uh, I'm not a big eater, I usually just eat at home," he mumbles before striding to the counter to order, "Can I get a medium 9-1-1, hot?"

He waits off to the side, collecting the steaming drink in quick order before moving back towards Hannibal to rejoin him at the small table. Will is a fascinating study in discomfort, with the way he arcs carefully away from even a brush up against another guest of the… fine establishment.

He hates admitting it, but there's a bit of fear in Hannibal when the smell of burnt coffee and overheated espresso wafts off Will's cup in droves. "What exactly is uh, *that*?" He thinks he can make out the smell of vanilla, just faintly, under everything else, but he's starting to worry this will burn his nose and render it useless. The steam is not a promising sign, either. So clear and white it's as if the coffee had just been freshly *boiled*.

Will frowns at him, nudging the glasses that hide such clear and stark eyes higher on his face. "It's a 9-1-1?" he says slowly before something almost mischievous lights up behind those wretched things. He pushes the cup across the table with less of his near present hesitance, lips curling up into what could be generously called a grimace of a smile. "Here. Try it."

Hannibal can clearly tell this is a trap Will aims to ridicule him with, although good natured. It's difficult to refuse when he wants to get closer to this interesting man, but Hannibal simply stares at the offered coffee for a few seconds. He wants Will's trust, even if the price seems steep.

"I would hate to deprive you of such a… concoction, Will."

"I was unaware you could drink an entire 16 ounce cup in a single sip, Hannibal," Will says back to him, a delighted bite lingering under the thin veneer of perfect politeness. It should feel like a taunt, or perhaps mocking. It does. But it's an excusable offense, when coming from someone as curious as the curly haired man in front of him. "Go on, I insist."

"You would be surprised by my many talents," Hannibal retorts pleasantly, hiding the bite in his words with far more ease. He'd hate to scare Will after all. "How could I refuse you, in the end?"

He regrets agreeing the second his tongue touches the too-hot liquid, knowing it's already burned. Damned horrible coffee stores with no real talent, Hannibal would see them all dead one day. He sets the cup down and manages a polite smile as he pushes it back towards Will,

the challenge won, even if the disgust won't appear on his face. He can't give him too much, after all.

"Definitely not *my* acquired taste, but thank you for sharing." At least this way he'll get a better look at the younger man's lips.

That clever mouth quirks up into something closer to a proper grin as he laughs, leaning back. Will picks up the cup, amusement practically wafting off of him as he takes another sip from the cup. Through the haze of thick steam, there's something enchanting about the pink curve of his mouth, the plushness of dry lips shining with spit. Hannibal wants to peel them from his face, study them.

And then Will finally answers his earlier question, "It's six shots of espresso, half-and-half, and Irish cream syrup. A 9-1-1."

"Yes I'm certain you'll need them after it," Hannibal retorts, looking at Will with concern. "Would it be too much to ask if I offered to cook you breakfast with far better coffee?" He knows it's a bit too straightforward, but Will seems to lack the social graces the average people are typically gifted with, so it could never hurt to ask.

"This is good coffee," Will defends automatically, as if his request had disappeared in the face of an insult to the horrible concoction that dares to even call itself coffee. Then the rest of Hannibal's request catches up with him and he looks up, startled. Blue eyes, crystal clear and wide like the doe before the car crash, meet his for only a moment before flitting away. Not fond of eye contact at all.

Hannibal imagines all the ways he could make Will look at him again, decides better of it for now, because they've only just met again. Though, having him willingly look would always be the better option, he wonders idly if tearing this man down and building him back up would fit better.

"Uh, well. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but we're not quite in Wolf Trap. I just work in the area, so-"

Hm, hesitant, but not a no. He can work with that.

"I work in the area as well. What's stopping us from enjoying good food, then? If you have trouble eating at work, it can't be good for you, Will." Just a nudge to his bleeding heart and Will crumples, if Hannibal is correct. And if he's not? He has other days and different ways to win the curly haired man's favor.

"I don't *have trouble* eating at work, I just don't bother with it. I forget to." *Ah, but forgetting and not bothering aren't the same thing, are they?* "I, uh, suppose you won't stop asking, will you? Guess I'll just have to say yes, then."

Hannibal, satisfied, smiles widely at Will. "If you truly wanted to say no, it would have been the first word out of your mouth. You seem too strong-willed to do otherwise."

Will gives him that grimace-smile again, hiding it behind that cursed drink of his. And that's all there is to it.

Chapter End Notes

Please note that we started writing this fic back shortly after Bones finished watching season for the first time in October but before Bones watched season two, and it had been a while since Salty watched season two as well. So while canonically Will's terrier is a boy named Buster, she's a girl named Clover in this and we love her.

This fic will update whenever it does, with no set schedule, though we do have a good number of buffer chapters. Give us your thoughts (and validation) in the comments, and we'll see you next time!

in a week

Chapter Summary

I have never known peace
Like the damp grass that yields to me
I have never known hunger
Like these insects that feast on me

Chapter Notes

I don't think we were originally going to post the next chapter so far but we *are* sluts for attention and validation so. Welcome to my "Will makes his own dog food and treats" agenda. No, I'm not sorry about the time jump, but please enjoy us smashing canon and remaking it into our own like shitty oven bake clay <3 **-Bones**

Ayyo shout out to **checks smudged writing on hand** Feng Shui Roll? Jk jk FuschiaDoll, I saw you say you were obsessed and I absolutely used that as an excuse to convince my bro to post c2, love you. Also spent most of the time we were meant to post this in awe at the fact that I'm hot with glasses on. **-Salty**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time has always slipped easily from Will. It feels like only a few days after he met Hannibal in that field outside his house have passed, and then suddenly it's been nearly three months and the retired surgeon is sitting in his living room with all six of Will's dogs begging for his attention while Will tries to grade the end of term papers he fucked himself over assigning. He's still not entirely sure what Hannibal does for work, but he knows it must be in or near Quantico, considering how often the man likes to stop in at his classroom between lectures. He doesn't work for the Academy, Will knows that for sure.

He looks up from the almost boring psychoanalysis he's grading to find Clover has managed to clamber her way up into Hannibal's lap, looking as smug about it as a dog can. Will has no illusions about it, he knows that Hannibal is her favorite. It's kind of sweet, actually.

"What does a retired surgeon even do for work in Quantico?" he asks, only realizing the abruptness of the question when the peaceful quiet shatters.

Hannibal looks up calmly, like Will's interruption hadn't surprised him at all. "Ah, I suppose I help investigators see the bigger picture. A consultant, of sorts." He rests a hand on Clover's head, gently petting her.

“Huh.” Will guesses he can see it. While not condescending - not to Will, at least - he’s noticed that Hannibal has a way of guiding conversation, asking the right questions. He’s seen students conspire to have someone ask the right questions in presentations before, but somehow he gets the idea that Hannibal isn’t sitting in a room full of FBI agents and asking pointed questions about David Bell’s theories. Even if the thought makes a quick tug to the side of his mouth.

“Yeah,” he says, when he realizes that leaving it hanging like that might be rude, “that fits you.”

Will’s never put much care into whether or not something could be misconstrued as rude, because he knows he is. He’s aware of how bitchy he can be, and if anyone has an issue with that, it’s not his problem. But he’s picked up how much Hannibal seems to prioritize politeness and, well-

He likes talking to him. Being his friend. What’s a small effort to keep that easier?

Hannibal chuckles, looking down at Clover. “Is that so? Have you put thought into it before, Will?” There’s a way about how he says *Will*, so fondly it’s like a compliment.

“Yes,” Will says bluntly as he reaches down to scratch behind Buster’s ears, because there’s no point in lying. “You’re the kind of person who likes to tell people why and how they’re wrong.”

Unable to cover a small huff of approval, Hannibal keeps his eyes on Clover. “I promise it’s nothing dangerous, so you don’t have to worry about me.” Will doesn’t think he’d have anything to worry about even if the gentleman were to be out in the field.

“I’m not worried. If you were in the field, they’d give you a gun.”

Besides, he’d have to be a fool to think Hannibal incapable of taking care of himself. He’s tall, broad shouldered, and clearly keeps in shape. Will notices things about people, that’s what he does. He sees things. He sees the way Hannibal moves, every step and movement carefully controlled and calculated. Hannibal knows his body well, and as a former surgeon, knows *other* people’s bodies well, too.

If the man was in a fight and he had to, Will would bet on him to win. And yet, whenever Hannibal puts a hand on his back to guide him, on his arm to catch his attention, he is never anything but gentle and warm.

“That’s true,” Hannibal agrees, scratching Clover’s head in little circles. “I’m not quite fond of guns, either, so I enjoy the work as it is. And it helped us meet again, so I cannot be anything but grateful, can I?”

“I’m not *fond* of them either,” Will mumbles, ducking his head back to the paper he was grading and firmly ignoring the second part of that, because *what the fuck*. Sometimes, Hannibal says things and Will is overcome by the impulse to strangle Hannibal for saying something like *that*, or himself for being so flustered by it. In three months, he’s figured out it’s just easier to let Hannibal say whatever he wants, embarrassing as it may be. “I still have

my licenses, but quitting the force was the best idea I had. Don't have to keep up with it anymore."

He can feel it when Hannibal's eyes land on him again, and he braces himself for the oncoming questions that everyone always has before- "Do you prefer your work at the academy, Will?"

It's not necessarily an unexpected question, but not the one he'd been bracing for. He blinks, slightly startled. Will would *prefer* to never have to leave his little haven with his six dogs and a good river to fish in not far, but that's not really what the man is asking, is it? Instead of saying that, Will shrugs, "Yeah. Less talking to people, I guess. I mostly just talk *at* them."

"Seems like it would be better to just stay here, then. Why not?"

Hannibal Lector is an insightful man, and it always startles Will; he's used to being the one who sees everything and every one, it never fails to knock him slightly off balance. "I'm unsure if you're aware, but being a hermit generally doesn't make a living wage."

"And I'm sure you're aware of your own intelligence, Will. If you enjoyed doing anything other than teaching at the academy, you would be there, I'm sure." Hannibal points out, patting Clover lightly on the side.

Will frowns, "I never said I didn't enjoy teaching. I do. It's certainly less stressful than homicide."

"And yet teaching homicide is preferred?" It's said in a way that could easily be taken as a joke, if Will chooses. Like Hannibal is willing to let him have the last word, not for the first time. It's an odd strategy from someone who usually points out every mistake one makes.

But Will has gotten into the habit of honesty, of brutality, with Hannibal. The former surgeon has never judged him for his honest thoughts; at least, he has never condemned Will for speaking his mind. It's refreshing and odd and a little terrifying in its strangeness, if he's honest.

So he lets his eyes wander over Hannibal's jaw, the strong line of his brows, before looking back to the papers in his lap and indulging him, "Yes. It's different to stand over a body and be tasked to find out who and why and how, and feel everything with that, than it is to show someone pictures and tell them the facts and then teach them how to piece it together. Generally, the case is complete before using it for training. You're not looking for an answer, it's already there; you're just showing someone how to find it."

Hannibal lets them simmer in the silence, seemingly satisfied with Will's answer as his eyes drift away.

Will gets through grading another paper and a half in the comfortable silence before a question rises, sudden and unbidden, to the front of his mind and pulls out from his mouth. "Why'd you stop being a surgeon?" he asks, pausing wince and glance at Hannibal, "If, uh, you don't mind me asking?"

Hannibal looks surprised this time, looking up from the dogs and back to him. “Of course I don’t, Will,” he assures, but still hesitates to answer, looking at Clover in his lap like she might eat up the question for him. “I used to be an emergency room surgeon. I killed my last patient. Or, rather, was unable to save his life. But it felt the same at the time.”

“Oh,” Will says. It feels like that tiny sound isn’t enough to encompass the wave of grief and regret that washes over him for Hannibal. It claws into his throat, sits behind his eyes with a kind of gravity that’s hard to escape. Yes, failing to find an answer to a question posed by a dead body sounds much easier than making a new one. “I’m sorry. I can imagine- that must have been horrible. I’m glad- I hope consulting is easier for you.”

He still stumbles hesitantly over firm statements around Hannibal. The man is smart, and Will can’t help enjoying the peace that comes with being a person first, and not a magic 8-ball empathy machine. It’s hard not to say *I’m glad it’s easier*, because he knows that it is. That Hannibal is almost… bored with life. But he’s not upset by it, not hurt. And surely that’s better, that’s something to be glad of.

Hannibal stands, with Clover in one arm, gently makes his way over to Will so as to not bump any of his dogs, and rests a hand on his shoulder. “Come now, I think you’ve earned a break, Will, don’t you?” It’s almost an order more than a suggestion, really.

Will finds he doesn’t particularly mind.

He knows that if it was anyone else, he would. If it was anyone else, he wouldn’t have let them touch his shoulder, would have swayed away the moment they got too close. But Hannibal has a way of situating himself in Will’s space, too close for comfort at first, and then staying there. He refuses to leave and instead, the space has shrunk. Now, Will doesn’t flinch when a broad, strong hand lands softly on his arm. Now, he doesn’t lean as far away as he can when Hannibal leans in to speak lowly.

He’s comfortable around Hannibal, he realizes. Comfortable with Hannibal, yes, but also comfortable in his own skin when the man is nearby. It’s a completely novel feeling, but one that’s heady and addictive. Hannibal might as well not be a person in the room with him, a mirage or a creature, something wholly else, because he soothes Will the same way his dogs do.

It’s nice. He likes it. He *enjoys* Hannibal’s presence. What an odd thought.

“Alright,” Will says, like he has any choice in the matter. The pause had seemed to stretch and fold into itself, hours in place of the few short seconds it had taken him to respond. “Should probably let the dogs out to run for a bit anyways.”

Hannibal hums in agreement, stepping away to let Will stand on his own, though he wouldn’t put it past the taller man to help him up at this point either. Hannibal has a way of caring that can seem overwhelming at times, even if he knows how to control himself. “Good idea, they look quite bored themselves,” he jokes, setting Clover down.

“Yes, I’m sure they’re all riveted by our discussion of career choices,” Will deadpans, opening the fridge to pull out the large container of dog food he keeps in there and portioning

it into the dogs bowls. He'll have to make more soon. With a click of his tongue, the six fall on their food bowls happily.

"Well," he considers, looking down at his dogs before reaching to scratch the tricolor border collie at his ruff, "Terrence was supposed to be a service dog before he failed out of training for that. So I guess he might care about our career advice."

Hannibal chuckles before heading to the kitchen. "Ah, but he doesn't have to worry about who to work for anymore, does he? He works for you," he says lightly, pulling out the pre planned meal he'd been bringing to Will since they agreed to dinner together that day in the coffee shop.

Will wrinkles his nose, "You make it sound like he's a service dog for me when you put it that way."

"Well, in a sense, aren't they all?" He asks as he sets out to work on cooking their meals. "They help you readjust when you return from work, help keep your routine because their needs depend on you. You could say it's a form of therapy, no matter how odd it seems to others."

"You sound like a therapist," he snorts, only half derisive, as he opens the door from the kitchen to the back. He sits at the table and watches as the dogs all run out in a line to do their business and run off their excess energy. Zoe seems content to sunbathe not far from the back door though, old dame that she is. "But you're not entirely wrong, I guess. It's easier to get up for someone else rather than yourself, isn't it?"

"I can hear your distaste for therapy in your voice," Hannibal teases, too busy cooking to look back at Will directly, but there's an obviously amused smile in his voice. "I believe weaponizing guilt in order to exist is sometimes the best survival mechanism our minds can come up with, actually."

"Therapy doesn't work on me," Will waves away. He watches Hannibal work, as much as he can, eyes on the line of strong, broad shoulders, sure in every movement. His sleeves are rolled up, suit jacket hanging over the back of the plush chair he takes up residence in whenever he visits Will's house. He's pretty sure he even saw the retired surgeon loosen his tie earlier.

Everything about Hannibal is so tight, so proper and polite and elegantly superior to the rest of the world that seeing him like this feels odd. Odd, but deeply gratifying. Hannibal does not wear his jacket at Will's house, doesn't completely armor himself in niceties and polite words only. Sometimes, he bitches right back at Will, in a completely understated kind of way that really can't be called *bitching* so much as playfully calling Will out on his shit.

It's nice, he likes to know his friend can relax here. Something about it makes him feel almost powerful, in a way. As if to say *I get to see this and you don't* to the rest of the world.

Hannibal is still smiling when he brings two full plates, and even more so when he casually feeds Will his first bite. He's just so smug about it, it's a bit annoying, even if he lets Will bat him away afterwards.

“That guy’s back again.”

“What guy?”

“The silver fox who keeps showing up at the door after Professor Graham’s classes? I saw him heading there on my way out again.”

"I stayed behind a bit the other day, and heard Professor Graham call him *Doctor*."

"Okay so?"

“*So*, he’s a doctor, probably somewhere here in Quantico. Don’t you want to figure out who he is?”

“Oh. What do you think they do in there after everyone leaves?”

“What? What are you- *oh my god*!”

“They could be! I’m just saying!”

"But I thought Professor Graham and Doctor Bloom-"

"There's no way Doctor Bloom and him are together, she *never* spends time *alone* with him!"

“Well, they are at work. Maybe they keep things professional!”

“No, she’s got a point, I’ve never seen them alone in a room together. Professor Graham never looks really comfortable talking to her.”

“Professor Graham never looks comfortable talking to *anyone*. Except this Doctor Whatever guy- I swear, I saw Professor Graham *smile* at him.”

“You’re lying!”

“I’m not!”

"Then it's obvious what we have to do, isn't it? We have to find out who he is, if they're married, or *why* they're spending so much time together."

"But- why?"

"Haven't you noticed he's been less strict lately? Only ever since this Doctor guy showed up!"

“You just want to get away with writing your essays the night before it’s due, don’t you?”

“Yes. Doesn’t mean I don’t want Professor Graham to be happy. And he’s clearly been happier lately!”

“Maybe we should just stay out of his personal business?”

“Pfft, yeah right. That sounds boring as hell. If I’m going to get my ass kicked by this class, I want gossip out of it.”

"Haha! Can you imagine *failing*? If I don't give this Doctor a gift basket for his existence, I could have!"

"*Anyways*, have you guys heard about the murders Agent Crawford is looking into? Sounds bad."

"Who leaked it?"

"Zeller, I think, hah!"

“That guy’s really pushing the line, how has he not gotten in trouble for it?”

“Well, I doubt he’s gossiping with the agents.”

“You got me there.”

Hannibal hates working alongside someone like Jack. Capable of good ideas at times, but more often than not depending on his underlings to make every choice. It infuriates him, makes him want to cut his tongue out and feed it as the main course for being a liar.

He knows better, of course, covers up the hungry beast that he is with polite platitudes he could care less for. He shows Jack *respect* in order to keep the status quo, to clean his hands of it. So he sits at the man’s desk, and smiles, even if this stops him from enjoying lunch with Will.

“So, Jack,” he starts, “why did you need me on such short notice?”

“I’ve got a case we could use your help on,” Jack says, with the smile he always gives Hannibal when he knows he’ll say yes. Hannibal hates this particular smile. “Different than usual. So far we have no bodies, nothing. Seven girls have been abducted across Minnesota, and we just got note of an eighth.”

He slides a file folder, not threadbare but nowhere near as thick as he’d prefer, across the table to Hannibal. He sits back, lacing his fingers beneath his chin and a frown heavy on his face. “That has all we’ve got on it in there, but it’s not much. We need all the help we can get with this. You’re not the only consultant I’m calling in for it.”

Hannibal thumbs through the file, looking over the pictures of the victims before finally glancing up at Jack. “And who might this be?” He’s curious, of course, because he’d rather work alone, but he can compromise if it’s who he thinks it is.

“He’s a profiler who teaches here at the Academy. Hasn’t consulted for *us* before, but he has consulted, and I hear he’s got a particular empathy disorder that might make him what we need for this.” And doesn’t that sound familiar? Jack checks his watch and stands. “Speaking of, I need to go meet him and bring him up here. I’ll debrief you both at the same time.”

With a firm clap of Hannibal's shoulder, Jack leaves, the room empty of anyone except Hannibal himself.

He holds back the murderous look he wants to shoot Jack and brushes off his shoulder with a short sigh. He hates when the BAU chief thinks he's even remotely allowed to touch him. No matter, he makes his way to the case room to look over the information better.

"-this is the other consultant I mentioned." He barely gets a good look at the corkboard with a map of Minnesota and pictures of all the missing girls before the door swings back open. When he turns, Will blinks back at him in mild surprise, their eyes connecting for a moment before Will ducks his head. Jack continues on, "Will, this is Dr. Hannibal Lecter, our regular consultant. Dr. Lecter, this is-"

"We, uh, we know each other, actually," Will cuts him off, stepping further into the room, further away from Jack. The man looks between them, clearly confused and a little annoyed.

"You do? Why didn't I know about that?"

"Because it was personal business, Jack," Hannibal steps up, hoping it eases Will's worries enough that he'll listen to *him* first.

"I just met you," Will says, beautifully blunt and rude as ever. It's charming to see it turned against someone else for once. "I didn't even know you *knew* Hannibal."

Jack sighs, shakes his head, and crosses over to the corkboard to gesture at it. He takes down one of the pictured girls there as he says, "Right, well, never mind that. These are the missing girls. All abducted on a Friday so they're not reported missing until Monday. However he's covering his tracks he needs the weekend to do it. This is the one who was just reported missing. Elise Nichols, St. Cloud State University on the Mississippi."

Will takes the photograph, studying it with that focused expression Hannibal is so used to seeing pointed at papers as he grades. He's quiet for a moment, looking between the picture of Ms. Nichols and the other girls on the pinboard. Jack may not understand it, going by the impatient line of his mouth, but Hannibal knows that Will's silent moments are almost always followed by pinpoint observations.

"One through seven are dead, don't you think? He's not keeping them around. Got himself a new one. For now, at least."

"Will is right, whoever he is, he has a special connection to either a girl that looks like these, or one of these girls." He's pleased Will can pick up on the details so fast, and knows he'll be able to make quick work of this so they can return to their normal routine. "He'll hide her to cover up how special she is, but we need to find the connection somewhere."

"His golden ticket," Will agrees, carefully tacking the photo back in place.

Jack eyes him for a moment. "I want you to get in closer." When Will opens his mouth to protest, the man barrels on, "You've got something no other consultant does. No other profiler. You have a specific way of thinking."

Will's eyes flare from where they stare past Jack's shoulder, back drawing up tight, and Hannibal has never seen his bite aimed so precisely at someone else as it is at this moment. Will is not just sharp, he's *upset*. How utterly fascinating.

"Has there been a lot of discussion about my specific way of thinking?" he bites out, sounding as if Jack says yes, he will simply walk out of the room.

"Not to my knowledge, Jack has not asked me," Hannibal assures Will, forgoing the usual touch to his shoulder. This is too interesting to stop quite yet.

Will shoots him an assessing look, as if he's trying to weigh how much he believes him, but Jack cuts in swiftly, "You make leaps you don't explain. And yet, I hear you're always right."

"The evidence explains," Will says, tersely, "And I'm not always right. No one is, that's not possible. I just look for the evidence."

"Then help us find some evidence," Jack presses. Hannibal watches the drawn up, tense line of Will's shoulder, can nearly taste how close he is to caving in.

"Do you fear my help won't be enough, Jack? Or are you badgering Will into agreement so you can close *this* case?" He likes Will relying on him, enjoys that he gets a view of Will that no one else does and he would *prefer* it to stay that way. For Jack to encroach on what's his?

Hannibal will make him pay eventually. Painfully.

Will turns to look at Hannibal, lips parted in surprise. A hint of a smile pulls at his lips before something weary falls over his face instead. "This may require me to be… sociable," he says, voice openly recalcitrant.

"You'll do it then?" Jack asks, and Hannibal can practically see him perk up like one of Will's dogs. "You're going to join us in the field? On scene?"

Through a tight frown, his dear Will says, "Yes, fine. I'll do it."

Hannibal knows this will certainly be too interesting to stop. "If Will goes into the field, then I would like to follow him, be sociable *for* him." He doesn't care what Jack says, they both know it's the better option. "Who better to help you interpret Will than a friend?"

Chapter End Notes

An additional note: Since most of Will's dogs don't have canonical names except for Buster, who've already named Clover in this and decided not to change, here's a run down of all the dogs and their names within this fic! Clover: jack russel terrier Terrence: tricolor border collie Buster: white chihuahua with malocclusion Zoe: white bichon frise (bc every bichon I've ever met has been named Zoe) Teddy: white short fur German shepherd pointer mix with a brown ear Toast: mastiff staffordshire terrier mix

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter! We'll see you next time!

moment’s silence

Chapter Summary

> when stunted hand earns place with man by mere monstrosity
> alarms are struck and shore is shook by sheer atrocity

Chapter Notes

> If the formatting looks off it’s bc I’m posting this from my phone instead of sleeping like I should be. Yes this chapter doubles the length of the fic. We’re insane, you know this. Shoutout to noorherself for giving me the motivation to pester Salty into finishing chapter 10 so we could post this chapter. Enjoy bitches **-Bones**
> I am very small and I am very tired, I've been worked all weekend while I was sick /j /lh. Anyhow I forget where we are in this one ngl, but I do know I'm also going straight to bed once I'm home. Who said first aid training was easy? Kill me. **-Salty**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time they get to the Nichols’ home in Duluth, Minnesota, Will is already starting to regret agreeing to the whole consulting thing. It has less to do with what Jack Crawford has asked of him and more to do with the fact that, skin still crawling from the insinuating questions about his ability to empathize with killers, he had been shoved into a car, a plane, another car, and now a stranger’s home. It’s far too many strangers and crowds and loudness for someone who has spent all social time outside of work with Hannibal, someone as comfortable in silence as he is.

The fact that Hannibal is not only here with him, but had outright said he didn’t mind helping Will cover the social aspects that make him itch, is the only blessing.

He lets Hannibal and Jack talk to Elise Nichols parents and eyes the nice little set up of pictures they have of her, of their family. It’s always struck as odd to Will, all the family photos out center and obvious. Is that what most families do? There’s trophies, decorative plates that no one will ever eat off of.

A picture of a younger Elise catches his eye when Mr. Nichols asks, “Could Elise still be alive?” *No*, Will thinks with surety rising up in him while Jack feeds them a nonanswer, a platitude. He knows the statistics; the first 24 hours after an abduction are the most vital. Afterwards, the chance of survival drops steeply. He knows why they ask, since none of the other girls’ bodies have turned up anywhere. But Elise Nichols is dead, and he’s sure of it.

“How's the cat?” Will asks when there’s a lull in the conversation. When Jack and Elise’s parents both send him baffled looks, he can’t help but glance at Hannibal before he repeats, “How's your cat? Elise was supposed to feed it. Was the cat weird when you came home? It must've been hungry. It didn't eat all weekend.”

“I didn’t notice,” Mr. Nichols says, and Will isn’t surprised. No one ever notices these kinds of things, no one but him. He wanders towards where Hannibal stands in his perfectly pressed suit, perfectly composed, because he can’t stand the weight of Mrs. Nichols’ watery eyes on him any longer.

"What are you thinking, Will?" Hanmibal asks, shifting slightly as if to better hide him, like he'd said he'd do. As a whisper, he asks, "You think she was taken from here, don't you?"

Sometimes, Hannibal says things and Will wonders if he’s trying to crawl into Will’s head the way Will does to everyone else. For once, the thought isn’t wholly unpleasant.

“Yes,” he murmurs back, “She fed the cat, he took her from here. And he did it easily, because no one noticed.” He pauses, a thought coming to him like the flash of fishscale through the water. He glances towards the Nichols, debating. “I need to see her room.”

"Jack," Hannibal says, motioning to the corridor.

“He took her from here,” Will says to Jack, sotto voce, the moment he joins them in the hall, “She fed the cat before he took her. She came home, she fed the cat, and then he took her and no one noticed.”

Jack lets out a slow, heavy breath through his nose as he pulls out his phone and dials the team’s temporary base. “The Nichols' house is a crime scene. I need ERT immediately. I want Zeller, Katz, and Jimmy Price. Yes, and a photographer.”

Mr. Nichols looks up and opens his mouth to say something, but Will cuts him off when he asks, “Can I- I need to see your daughter’s room.”

Elise Nichols made no struggle. There was nothing amiss to notice. Granted, local police rarely ever do a thorough job and Will is well aware of that. But how do you miss an entire girl going missing from somewhere? She didn’t struggle. She was in bed in her childhood bedroom, and likely asleep when he came for her.

"We'll make sure to leave everything as it is, we just want to make sure we didn't miss anything," Hannibal follows up for him, smiling politely as he always does. He reassures while demanding at the same time. They probably don't see it the way Will does.

Will has always seen more than everyone else, after all.

Hannibal has a pair of nitrile gloves on him for some reason, but Will doesn’t bother to ask why. The man always seems to know what Will needs before he asks for it. He pulls them on as they head up the stairs and down the hall to Elise’s bedroom. When he sees the cat, claws scrabbling at the gap under the door, time seems to slow down. He looks at the almost frantic little thing and mumbles, “There you are.”

Will has to nudge the cat back and away gentle with his foot, ignoring the sound of Mr. Nichols coming up behind them, when he pushes open the bedroom door. It's dim and silent inside, and Elise Nichols lays in her bed, face blank and body still not in sleep, but death. *And there she is*, he can't stop himself from thinking morbidly.

Hannibal stops the father from accessing the room while giving Will enough of a gap to get in. "It would be best if you waited in the kitchen, sir. You won't want to remember this."

There's red starting to stain Elise's nightgown, white and pure. She's been laid flat on her back, arms straight beside her. Will has never met anyone who sleeps like that; she looks like she fits better in a funeral. Perhaps that's what this is, he muses to himself, taking in the room as he hears the sirens start to arrive on the street outside the house. White is so often seen as the color of innocence, but it's a mourning color in parts of the world, too.

The killer has constructed his own private funeral for her, but none of the other girls. Something about her is different. Wrong. He steps further into the room, observing her room. It's bland, the way rooms that aren't lived in are all bland. But the window with its fluttering curtains opens to a small balcony, and Will knows that's where he'll start.

"Will," Hannibal calls softly, "I'll send Jack and the others downstairs. Would you like for me to leave as well?" His voice is steady, comforting.

"Please," he says just as softly, but he can't make himself look away from the body laying on the bed. The story waiting to be told, the *answers* begging to be found. He realizes that he didn't properly answer the question and makes himself continue, "Stay. You can stay."

"I'll be right here with you Will," Hannibal assures, moving close enough that he could reach back and grab that perfect suit if he needs to.

It's a soothing thought. He closes his eyes and lets the pendulum swing, lets himself sink into the man who killed Elise Nichols.

He stands over her, beside the bed. She is beautiful and peaceful and innocent in her sleep. There's the temptation to brush the hair from her face, because she sleeps on her back and her dark hair trails over her face. But she shifts in her sleep, not much but enough that he knows he's out of time.

It's not hard to climb onto the bed- no, that would wake her, he *leaps*. He straddles her waist, because she can't fight back if she can't sit up. His hands fold around her throat as she jerks up, jerks awake. Her hands come to grip at his wrists, but she doesn't dig them into his skin. She can't; it takes her too long for the fog of sleep to clear and by the time it does, the lack of oxygen is getting to her.

He is killing her and she is wide eyed, she is looking at him, *watching him as he kills her-*

A warm hand softly lands on Will's shoulder, rousing him. "You were told not to come in," Hannibal's polite bite is directed at someone else.

Will doesn't startle, but emerges with a deep breath as the world starts to filter back in with the hand on his arm an anchor point. He blinks and he's not alone- or rather, not alone-with-Hannibal. There's a woman in the room with them, with golden brown skin and dark hair and darker eyes staring right at him. Will shifts slightly, ducking his head away from her and towards Elise, because at least Elise isn't watching him with accusing eyes.

No, he's already laid Elise to rest as best as he can. No, that's not right. *Will* didn't kill her. The killer whose shadow reflection is trying to crowd into his head did. He's Will Graham, he did not kill this girl. He was not the one who laid her gently to rest as best as he could.

"You're Will Graham," the woman says, but Hannibal steps between them to take the brunt of the conversation. She doesn't seem too bothered by his presence at all.

"I believe you were instructed to stay out of here."

"You wrote the standard monograph on time of death by insect activity. I found antler velvet in two of the wounds." She looks between the two curiously, eyes sparkling with mischievous delight. "You, uh, not real FBI?"

"Special investigators," Will says, swallowing with a throat dry. He tears his eyes away from Elise, who's no longer safe to look at. Instead, he studies the familiar lines of Hannibal's shoulders, follows the flow to his arms, his hands. The hands that pulled him back so very gently and so very easily. "I… teach. At the Academy."

"Miss Beverly," Hannibal warns again, just as Jack comes in. Hannibal turns away from her to look at Will, but he doesn't reach out for him again. Will finds himself… disappointed by that, though he's not sure why.

"You know you're not supposed to be in here," Jack says, stern and disapproving as he frowns at her.

Antler velvet, she had said, Will remembers. The woman - Beverly, apparently - had come in to look for antler velvet. Heavy taste of regret and guilt washes up his throat and he has to swallow before it does more than just threaten to gag him. There are more people filing into the room now and Will scrambles for a semblance of control, trying to wrest it back from the thing trying to roost in his head. He's always felt unsteady after letting himself sink so deeply into his own head, but he'd never realized the feeling would be different when he wasn't alone with his dogs.

"Velvet- you said there was antler velvet?" Will speaks up, clearing his throat, "In the- the wounds?"

"I found antler velvet in two of the wounds, like she was gored. I was looking for velvet in the other wounds – but I was interrupted," Beverly says, pointing towards him. That seems to set Hannibal off, in a way. He reaches out and touches Will's arm again.

He doesn't sigh in relief, but he feels it sink into his skin. "I was here first, actually," he points out. But neither of them gets to continue when someone else cuts in.

“Hold on, excuse me,” another man, who Will would hazard a guess and bet is part of the forensics team, interrupts, “Look, deer and elk pin their prey, okay? They put all their weight into their antlers, try and suffocate a victim. That’s how they would kill, like, a fox or a coyote.”

The comparison rankles something in Will, his head aching dully. Elise Nichols was *not* a fox or coyote. If anything she was- she was the doe.

“All right, Elise-” Jack starts but Will tramples over him to speak, to get his thoughts out of his head and into the air in a rush,

“Antler velvet is rich in nutrients. It actually promotes healing. He may have put it in there on purpose. He- He wanted to undo as much as he could- given that he’d already killed her. Heal her. *Help* her. He’s-” Will cuts himself off, trying to chase the tangled thread of his own thoughts and only getting the dull ache in his head to turn into a throbbing in reward.

“He wanted to honor her, then? Put her back as an apology?” Hannibal hovers close, trying to get a good look at Will.

“Is this his golden ticket?” Jack asks, expectant and steely cold, like Will might have all the answers for the case hidden in his head now, after only looking for a few seconds.

Hannibal is quick to come to his rescue again, guiding Will to the door of the bedroom for them to leave. “Of course not, Jack. If she were, he would never have done this.”

“Whatever he did to the others, he couldn’t do it to her. This is his apology,” Will agrees, letting Hannibal guide him out. He can feel the weight of the room’s eyes on them, on *him*, and it’s not until he and Hannibal emerge back in the stairwell that he lets himself deflate.

“Fuck,” Will says softly, then, because he knows Hannibal doesn’t like swearing, “Sorry. Do you have any aspirin?”

“Of course Will, let’s get you home,” his friend says softly, leading him all the way to his car.

“Pretty sure Jack is going to make us debrief before we can go to the airport,” Will points out, but he doesn’t argue further as closes his eyes, rests his head against the window, and soaks in the sound of the classical music station that Hannibal prefers.

Hannibal is a man of principle, of course. One has to be if they are to live as he does, and not get caught for as long as he has. These principles are not inherently good by nature, and oftentimes he’d rather be rid of them entirely. It’s why he hates working with Jack but goes through with it for the sake of appearing perfect, after all.

It is different with Will Graham. The mystery of all that he is, of all that he sees, makes Hannibal want to dig his fangs and talons deep and have Will see all of the beast that he *is*.

It’s infuriating how soft-hearted Will is, despite the prickly exterior he often displays, his heart is good. Too good to accept Hannibal as he is for the moment. But his mind, his

beautiful imagination, is ripe for the picking with a few persuasions here and there, Hannibal knows this. Maybe that's why he makes sure to clear his schedule the second day after they return.

It would be best to visit Will with fresh foods, but the psychiatrist hasn't had a chance to hunt anything refined enough for his dear Will's palate quite yet. He supposes they'll have to settle on pork as the protein for now. And that's how he finds himself knocking at Will's door, ready to catch him should he need it.

The Will he had left at the airport days prior had looked tired and weary and perhaps a little bit like his head was too full of what impressions he had picked up from the scene of Elise Nichols' murder. The Will that opens the door to stare at him blankly for several long seconds before stepping aside with a soft *oh* of understanding somehow manages to look *worse*. He's pale, with dark circles under his eyes, and the unpleasant scent of stale sweat clinging to his skin.

"Hannibal," Will says, sounding a bit relieved. He steps back further to wave him in, all seven of his dogs rushing up to greet Hannibal.

Ah, that doesn't feel right. Since when did Will have *seven* dogs?

"Found yourself a new friend, Will?" he asks, walking in before picking up Clover to let her bask in the glory of being *tall*. He looks over the dogs, settling on the newest stray of the bunch with amusement.

It's clear whatever happened with Elise Nichols has shaken him deeply, setting something like a stone free in his mind, maybe? Cracking away at those polished walls of his. Hannibal is grateful another cannibal has helped him in his mission, and is looking forward to use them further in the near future.

"Winston," Will nods, sitting down on the edge of his sofa bed. Hearing his name, the dog looks up from where it inspects Hannibal's shoes and trots over to rest his head in Will's lap. The wan man smiles at the mutt, brushing his thin fingers through thick fur. "I found him on the road on the way home. He still had a rope tie and lead around his neck, he must have bitten through it to escape."

Hannibal doesn't believe anyone else has noticed, because his dear Will is so very good at playing the hedgehog and keeping everyone out with his thorns, but Will's soft heart bleeds everywhere. It is a wonder how something as constantly bleeding as he has survived so long. Perhaps it is through the way he can delve into people's minds, or perhaps in spite of. Hannibal doesn't know, but he aches to.

"So," Will drawls before he can say anything, sour and arch, "Jack mentioned you were a *psychiatrist*."

"I thought you'd already figured it out yourself, Will," Hannibal says honestly, though there is a touch of amusement that comes through, like he's teasing Will. Which he maybe shouldn't be. "But if you're worried about me working with Jack to get you on this, I assure

you he hadn't mentioned you before. And my intentions with you are purely personal, as I'm sure you must have also noticed by now."

He knows Will won't answer that, which is why he feels confident setting his bags in the kitchen. There's nothing he can do other than await his judgment, despite already knowing the outcome. The *special agent* would not deny him so easily.

Hannibal would make sure of it.

"Are you cross with me, Will?"

"Yes," Will says, sounding petulant. He heaves a sigh, but Hannibal can hear him moving to sit in the kitchen- most likely to watch him cook, as the empath is so fond of doing. "No, not really. But talking circles around something isn't the same thing as actually telling me, Hannibal. It's embarrassing."

Hannibal stops himself from saying that it's only embarrassing because Will didn't figure it out. "You're not my patient, Will. I don't make a habit of treating friends like I would one of them," he says to ease the younger's mind. He knows Will's disdain for therapy in all its shapes and colors, which was why he'd avoided prying into him so viciously as he would have liked.

He wants Will to enjoy his company, to enjoy the time they spend together. He wants more from him, wants something so visceral and deep he's not sure he can put it into words. "I'm sorry for upsetting you, however, so if you prefer I leave, please let me know."

"I didn't say that," Will grouses and though Hannibal knows he's scowling at his back, his friend sounds much more relaxed and the scowl is likely a playful thing. Sometimes, it seems as if Will doesn't know how to play without biting, like one of the unruly puppies he tries to pretend he doesn't collect clips of. It is in equal parts mildly infuriating as it is intriguing.

With another sigh, somehow both heavier and lighter, Will admits, "I haven't slept much. Or well. It's throwing me off course."

"You should have called, I would have arrived sooner to make you food," Hannibal scolds lightheartedly as he turns away from the food to look at Will. "Has the case been keeping you up?" He's curious, more curious than he can show, but Will looks like nightmares might be the reason he can't sleep after all.

"Not the case, not really. I've been having… weird dreams. Nightmares, I guess." Will stands from the table and Hannibal watches as the man goes about grabbing a glass and pouring himself two fingers of whiskey. The routine seems practiced, as if he's been doing it frequently over the last few days. "I keep dreaming about her. Elise Nichols. Not even proper nightmares. She's just… there. It wakes me up."

Hannibal thinks about it for a bit, but knows why Will is saying all of this. To see if Hannibal will act as his friend or a therapist, and while he would love to tell him that he is obsessing over the crime, over the killer, he decides otherwise. He's not even sure his friend is aware of it himself. "How can I help you, Will?"

The smile that earns him is thin and pale, more of a grimace than a smile, really. “Tell me what you’re going to cook? You’re always cooking for me and I know you like to talk. Talk about cooking.”

Will’s newest stray - Winston, he’d said - is back at his knee, head in Will’s lap. Hannibal hasn’t been left free from the little pack either, considering Clover is leaning in his arm to sniff at the bag he brought with them. Naughty little thing.

He walks towards Will and offers her to him. “I’ll leave her in your care, then.” He finally takes his suit coat off, draping it over the back of the chair he usually occupies, rolls up his sleeves and loosens his tie. Now that Will is no longer entirely annoyed at him, he finds it easier to slip into something of a more comfortable mindset.

“Today, we will be eating pork confit with simple cheese omelets, and some homemade jams and bread for you to test while you wait, if you’d like,” he says, washing his hands before setting about to make a show for Will, as much as he can in a smaller kitchen than he’s used to.

“You really like cooking,” Will says, curiosity saturating the statement. He sets about preparing a slice of bread and, completely untoasted, slathers it in a peach jam Hannibal brought with him. He takes a bite of his not-toast and lets out a pleased hum. “Where’d you learn?”

“I’ve always had a passion for food, so I took culinary classes as I traveled, hoping to master the craft before coming here. Though, working in the kitchen has never been for me, I prefer hosting my own private events,” he explains, putting the pork in the oven and starting it to finish them. “It’s a way to relieve stress, as well. My favorite hobby, one could say.”

It’s an art, as well, one he has worked hard to perfect when it comes to his own craft. A necessary challenge to be able to taste things most would only have nightmares over. He’s glad it helps him share his passion with others.

He’s glad he can use it for Will.

“That sounds nice. The way you talk about it,” Will shakes his head, sipping his whiskey and taking another bite of bread and jam. He pauses to swallow before continuing his thought. “You love it. The way you talk about it- you really like it. It’s nice to hear you talk about something you like. I can’t imagine just… caring so much about food.”

Will ducks his head, clearly embarrassed, but Hannibal’s mind is elsewhere.

He’s never thought about it before, that his art had love in it, had care that he couldn’t consciously come up with, spilled into it. The fact Will believes he *loves* cooking gives everything a brand new perspective that he’s not sure a beastly creature like himself can understand. Is he fattening Will up for slaughter or for more carnal reasons? Are those carnal desires tied to his need to pierce flesh elegantly and make elaborate meals to parade around like a peacock would show off its gracious plumage. Is he but a plumage of flesh and sinew in that scenario, then?

“I suppose loving food is not for everyone,” he deflects, brain abuzz with thoughts. “But isn’t that why I’m here, Will? So you don’t need to worry about cooking?”

Will gives him a considering look, going so far as to briefly meet his eyes. He’s still pale and wan, still looks ill, but he gives Hannibal a small, genuine smile. “Yeah,” he agrees easily, teasing, “What was it, something about making sure I eat well? Guess we’re more alike than I’d thought, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal knows what Will is insinuating, but it doesn’t help the twinge of his heart at the light jab. He never thought he’d hear his dear Will call him *that*, but he’d let it happen again so long as the other man kept giving him that smile.

He finally returns said smile, yet deflects again, much like Will does, “Are we, now? Does that make us better friends, Will?”

Will gives him that searching look again, the same look he gave the scene earlier that week. He looks like he’s trying to crawl into Hannibal’s head, make sense of what he’s seeing until it’s as clear as crystal and he can burrow deep. It is a thought both lovely and foreign and uneasy.

The younger man stands and sets his whiskey glass down with a definitive click. It happens slowly, as if the world has paused to prolong the moment. Will stands next to him and leans until their shoulders are pressed gently together. Shoulders, then arms, and then he tilts his head into Hannibal’s shoulder. Fists his hand into the back of his shirt near his opposite hip, no doubt wrinkling it but burning through the material to scald his skin all the same. The hug - because that’s what Will is doing, an awkward kind of side hug - lasts only a few seconds before Will seems to fluster and move away.

“Would it be childish of me to call you my best friend?” he asks quietly, as if he hopes Hannibal won’t hear.

Hannibal’s skin where Will had just been touching him is alight with a tingling heat that digs into his flesh and spreads through his bones like some kind of addicting blood he would kill to taste again. He reaches for the younger, pulls him close again with an arm around his waist as he sets aside the pan for the omelets. He smells of petrichor and sweat, of musky woods and mud, where Hannibal presses their heads together, side to side for fear of the hunger Will might see sleeping in his eyes.

He keeps a steady hold of himself, of course, despite keeping him as close as he possibly can, like he wants to steal the heat Will seems to always emit in waves. “Of course not, Will,” he says softly, closing his eyes to take in all of the man in his arms better. He’s not sure what it is, but he feels it in his chest, how important the younger man must be.

“Ah, well. Good,” Will stammers, “I, uh- I need to feed the dogs, and *you* need to feed me. I mean-”

“The dogs already have food,” Hannibal chuckles, keeping his hold gentle and easy to get out of, even if Will doesn’t move. He wonders, idly, if it’s because he knows he’s in the maw of a predator right now, of a vicious beast that could eat him. “But you’re right, you should eat.”

“Then I’ll let you cook,” Will murmurs and finally slips from his grasp to down the last of his whiskey. If Hannibal didn’t know better, he’d say the man was uncomfortable. But though his shoulders are hiked up to his ears and his head ducked to stare down at another one of his pack of dogs, he looks a little better than when he had opened the door. Flustered by it, by his own boldness, perhaps. But not upset or uncomfortable to have rested himself in the mouth of a beast.

Would Hannibal really eat him?

Will isn’t wholly unused to the prospect of his nightmares spilling over into daylight. It happened more often than he’d admit, when he was younger. As a child, and even into high school, he hadn’t been nearly as good at handling what he saw and confining it to only those moments. He hadn’t learned how to compartmentalize well yet, and it had led to an extremely awkward kid and teenager who was incredibly blunt, rude, and had a penchant for staring off into a corner and vividly imagining things he would rather not.

His head hasn’t felt like it was sitting on his shoulders right since the return from Minnesota. There had been a brief reprieve when Hannibal visited him, but that had faded shortly after. And now he’s hiding from Jack in the bathroom, pretending that the cold water doesn’t feel like blood sliding down his face.

Unfortunately, Lady Luck has never been on Will’s side.

Jack walks in just as he’s wiping his face dry, voice hard and disapproving when he asks, “What are you doing in here?”

“I enjoy the smell of urinal cake,” Will says with biting sarcasm, because he doesn’t think he could get away with *I don’t know, what do you do in bathrooms, Jack?*

“Me too. We need to talk. USE THE LADIES’ ROOM!” Will tries not to flinch and freeze when Jack shouts at the poor agent who tries to walk in. He’s grateful Jack had turned away from him, leaning against the grounding cold of the porcelain sink instead. He does his best not to look the man in the face when Jack turns back to him and demands, reproving, “You respect my judgment, Will?”

“Mm-hmm, yes,” he nods. It’s barely an answer, and not quite true, but he doubts the older agent actually cares.

“Good, because we will stand a better chance of catching this guy with you in the saddle.”

“Yeah, I’m in the saddle. I’m just, um, confused which direction I’m pointing,” Will winces. He’s getting worked up now, needs to move, to do *something*. The shadow in the back of his mind mourns, says *I’m sorry*, says *I loved her*, says *it wasn’t right*. But Will doesn’t know what that *means*, not about the man who killed seven other girls with no trace and then tucked Elise Nichols back into bed. “I don’t know this kind of psychopath. I’ve never read about him. I don’t even know if he’s a psychopath. He’s not insensitive. He’s not shallow.”

“You know something about him; otherwise, you wouldn’t have said, *This is an apology*. What is he apologizing for?” Jack demands, like Will is a Magic 8 Ball who will give him all the answers if he shakes him hard enough. He feels a little like he’s being shaken right now.

He’s pacing now, because Will feels like if he doesn’t move he might just start screaming wordlessly in frustration. He gestures, talking with his hands like it can block him from Jack’s burning gaze, “He couldn’t honor her. He feels bad!”

“Well, feeling bad defeats the purpose of being a psychopath, doesn’t it?” Jack demands, ignoring his agreement, “What kind of crazy is he?!”

Will breathes, deep and slow, and *does not flinch*. He searches for the right words, debates pulling all of his hair out one by one, and swallows down the urge to bite out that Jack should find someone else to ask. Instead, he manages to get out, “He couldn’t show her he loved her, so he put her corpse back where he killed it. Whatever *crazy* that is.”

He knows it’s true the moment he says it. He feels it deep in his bones, an ache that throbs in time to the shadow mourning that he couldn’t *honor* her. It howls like a lion against the injustice of that, prowls and says that there was something wrong with her. That she was not the deer he hunted, that he killed something not quite right by mistake.

“You think he loves these girls?” Jack demands, with equal disbelief and disgust.

"He loves one of them. A-And, yes,” Will scrambles to explain, starting to feel a bit like cornered prey himself, “I think by association he has some form of love for the others.”

“There was no semen, there was no saliva. Elise Nichols died a virgin. She stayed that way.”

The words well up, frustrated - *angry* - and fervent as the lion speaks with his mouth, “That’s not how he’s loving them. He wouldn’t disrespect them that way! He doesn’t want these girls to suffer! He kills them quickly and… to his thinking, with mercy.”

These girls are not, he knows, mindless prey. He *honors* them, not like the deer he devours but not wholly unlike them either. He kills them like the fawn left lonesome, and loves them like the cub.

“Sensitive psychopath,” Jack says after a long moment, nodding slowly. Will grips the edge of the sink reflexively, desperately hoping Jack will let him be now. “And what does Dr. Lecter think about this theory of yours?”

The words slip out before Will can stop himself, “Contrary to belief, we don’t talk about you or work, Jack.”

Thankfully, Jack lets it be with only a raised eyebrow before he turns and nods to the way out. “Come on. We’re going to the lab, the team is starting the autopsy now.”

Despite the small reprieve, Will still feels trapped, pinned in place. He follows the agent quietly but the clambering unease, the desperate part of him that wants to slip away to somewhere quiet and empty to recalibrate, doesn’t fade away the entire walk down to the lab.

It’s only when they reach the lab and he sees Hannibal waiting with the forensic team, off to the side and prim and proper as ever, that he feels something like relief.

Hannibal glances over at him with a slight frown, tilting his head like a curious bird, because for all his preening and care in his posture, Hannibal is most like a crow. "Will, are you alright?" He asks, making room for them to stand together.

“Fine,” he says with a grimace. Will lets himself stand half a step behind Hannibal, distance himself a bit from where Jack watches as the forensic team of three start on their autopsy. “Jack just cornered me in the bathroom to get me here. I don’t think he’s *pleased* with my theories.”

Hannibal's sharp eyes turn on Jack then, as if insulted or even *angry* on his behalf. It's touching. "Well, he should learn a better coping mechanism than taking it out on you," he says precisely, treating Jack like one of his patients, almost.

"Ok. Tried her skin for prints of course nothing," Jimmy starts, and Hannibal would usually comfort Will with a touch, but it never comes. "We did get a hand spread off her neck."

Will isn’t surprised, not really, but the words still roll over him like a heavy cloth. Yes, it’s not surprising that they would. His hands are so strong, *were so strong*, when he sat on her chest and mangled her delicate neck-

He blinks hard, staring at Elise’s body and willing himself to remember that it wasn’t *him* who killed her. It was the shadow of the lion digging its way into his brain, the killer who stole her from everyone around her. Sound filters back in and he swallows.

“Piece of metal is all we got,” Beverly is saying.

“We should be looking at plumbers,” Will says around his heavy tongue, “steamfitters, tool workers.”

Brian pipes in, motioning at the wounds, "Other injuries were probably but not conclusively post-mortem. So not gored."

Hannibal steps in closer, examining the wounds with the detachment of a doctor. Of course he would. "She has lots of piercings that look like they were caused by deer antlers." Beverly looks at Will as she points out the wounds, curious in a way that seems a bit too overeager. "I didn't say the deer was responsible for putting them there."

He can see it in his mind. Elise, beautifully and mercifully dead, dressed in her white nightgown. He can see the way the antlers would have pierced through her chest, pushing out with a rush of blood and broken ribs. He sees the way she looks up at him with empty eyes, *accusing*.

“She was mounted on them,” Will adds, thankful his voice isn’t brittle. He imagines the way he would have lifted her to do it, how the blood would have run down her skin. “Like hooks. She may have been bled.”

"Her liver was removed," Brian replies in shock, almost awe.

"See that? He took it out, and then- yep, he put it back in." Jimmy says as his hands are in Elise's body, prodding around when Hannibal turns to have a better look. Will thinks his heart stops all together.

"He wouldn't have gone through all this if this weren't important to him. Could she have a form of cancer?" His friend asks, looking at Will thoughtfully, like he suspects the same thing Will does.

He has to swallow around the saliva and dread pooling in his mouth. The lion leaps and devours its own cub. It will make more, *find* more, and the cycle will continue. He loves her, so he eats her. Well, the closest approximation of her. He devours her and protects her in the breath- *loves* her.

“He’s, um, he’s eating them,” Will says, stumbling over the words. Inside his head, the lion roars in agreement, *honor her*.

The fact that Jack drags him and Will away and to his office, instead of letting them go out for lunch like Hannibal would have prefered, irritates him, crawls under his well-worn skin and bite at his nerves. He wants to tell Jack he has better things to do than to look for a pathetic man like the cannibal they are searching for.

Instead, he sits comfortably in one of the chairs and observes Will and Jack, hands in his lap. He does do hate to have his plans interrupted when he so wishes to spend time with his dear Will, all rattled and in need of an anchor. He looks delicious, tormented as he is.

While he usually enjoys silence, the tension between Jack and Will does little to soothe his already smoldering temper. "Tell me, then, how many confessions?"

Jack looks at him, lips pressed in a thin line. "Twelve dozen, the last time I checked. None of them had details until this morning." It's then Hannibal realizes the officer's own temper is flaring, for an entirely different reason. "And then they all had details. Some genius in Duluth PD took a photograph if Elise Nichols' body with his cell phone, shared it with his friends and then Freddy Lounds posted it on Tattlecrime.com."

For a moment, he feels absolutely vindicated at seeing Jack that angry. He has to tamp it down lest it rise to the surface, of course, but he'll be able to enjoy this later.

“Tasteless,” Will says with a curl of his lips that reminds him of the first time they met, Clover’s foot caught in a trap. He manages to make the word sound more like *disgusting*, or perhaps even *pathetic*. Righteous anger is a good look on him.

"Do you have trouble with taste, Will?" Hannibal asks, unable to help himself.

"My thoughts are often not tasty."

"Nor mine, no effective barrier."

"I build forts."

"Associations come quickly," Hannibal teases, preening under Will's huffed anger and glare. While this would usually fall into their usual banter, he gets the hint and relents. "My apologies, Will. Now, if that was all, Jack-"

"Actually," Jack cuts him off as Hannibal goes to stand and his rudeness is obscene- more so than Will because the man, typically, respects proper manners. "There's another reason I called you both in. I need Will to see a psychiatrist."

“No,” Will snaps immediately, scowl turning into something real. “There’s no point. Therapy doesn’t work on me and you won’t like me *psychoanalyzed*, Jack.”

“If you’re going to be on the field, you need someone to make sure you’re not losing yourself,” Jack says bluntly. He doesn’t seem to notice the way Will recoils at that, but Hannibal does. It’s not quite a flinch but his whole body draws back, tight. And still, the man barrels on, “Now, I think Alana Bloom would-”

"Jack," Hannibal interrupts this time, finally standing and putting himself between the two. "I believe you already have me helping Will on this, don't you?"

Jack's annoyed expression delights Hannibal, he wants to make the man suffer for trying to assign a *keeper*, of all things, to *his* Will.

"Isn't being friends with a patient a conflict of interest, Dr. Lecter?" Jack can blame semantics all he wants, but Hannibal isn't stepping in to psychoanalyze Will, he has enough freedom in their private time together, to get a good look at Will under the surface.

He chooses to ignore Jack's comment and turn to Will instead. "Will, this is your choice and I would hate to make you uncomfortable."

“I’m not seeing a psychiatrist or therapist or anything, Jack,” Will says firmly, jaw tight and angry. He’s tapping his fingers against the arm of his chair so fast it looks like his hand is shaking, like he’s about to lurch up to pace angrily. “And if I need to see one to work in the field, then great. I don’t need to be in the field. Was that all?”

He starts to rise, but drops back down reflexively when Jack snaps a ‘*Sit back down!*’ sharply. The almost trained response rankles against Hannibal’s skin; he wants to bite at the hand Jack had slammed against his desk, because he knows Will won’t.

“Well, *I do*!” the profiler says, “I need you in the field, so we better get to a solution damn quick!”

Will sets his jaw, lifts his chin mutinously, and Hannibal can’t help the small bit of pride that gives him. “No psychiatrist. You want me to, what? Talk to someone so I don’t lose myself. I know who I am, Jack, and so does Hannibal. Is that all?”

"I believe Will made his point. If you truly need to write down someone as his psychiatrist, then go ahead and note my name," Hannibal tells Jack flippantly.

"*Doctor Lecter*," Jack tries to warn, but it is of little to no concern to the creature that resides under Hannibal's skin.

He has better things to do than let Will get bullied into seeing someone he clearly has no care to see, though it would be interesting. He offers Will a hand, making quick motions for him to follow. "Have you spoken with Alana Bloom concerning this? Last I recall, the psychiatrist you choose has to accept their patient as well, Jack."

When the man's reply is simply silence, Hannibal hides a victorious smirk.

Will clings to his wrist, fingers digging in as much as they can through the sleeve of his suit jacket, almost certainly wrinkling it. He finds he doesn't mind so much if it's the empath doing it.

"I- I can't believe he- I'm-" Will stumbles over his words once they're far enough from the office, sounding tongue tied and outraged as he grips tight enough Hannibal's wrist begins to ache. "I can't believe he wanted me to work for him and then tried to put- put *restraints* on that when I said yes!"

Hannibal lifts his arm, and Will's hand in turn, to rest his free hand atop the younger man's. He doesn't want him to let go, because even over the fabric of his clothes, he can feel the heat that fills Will.

"There's no shame in not making a deal with the devil," he assures gently, looking at his friend as closely as he'll allow.

He hopes Will agrees, hopes the man turns to him like the sun and asks for his help. Hannibal would give and harm anything to get Will to join him. At the same time, he hesitates to pull the empath out of this completely. The excitement it would be to see Will unravel in these cases, to see him lose a part of himself completely.

"Is this something you truly desire to follow through with?"

The question seems to surprise Will, cutting off his anger before it can bubble over into rage. He frowns, looking up to Hannibal's face briefly, then down to their hands.

"I should finish what I started, at least," he says after a moment of contemplation, which is more of a non answer than anything else. "And I don't dislike the idea of helping. Why wouldn't I want to help find this killer? It's just… Jack keeps changing the terms on me. I don't *get* what he wants from me. Everyone always wants something. Usually, they're a lot clearer about it."

When he trails off, his voice is filled with frustration, heavy with it. He shakes his head, shrugs and gives Hannibal a quick grimace-smile. "And I can't believe he'd bring up Alana. You know, we've never even been in a room alone before? She avoids it for some reason and thinks I don't notice. I always notice."

His dear, naive Will, with his bleeding heart. It's no wonder he's willing to make a deal with a man like Jack, Hannibal realizes. Will feels like he is in no position to refuse, with his

empathy.

Hannibal wants to dig a hand into the man's rib cage to find that bleeding thing and stop it. Instead, he rubs his thumb over Will's hand, just once. "Then it's a matter of perspective, Will. Think of something you want from Jack and demand it of him to change the terms of your agreement."

No simple thing, not when Will would rather give and give and not take anything that's even offered to him. Hannibal knows he had to practically force himself into entering the empath's life.

"If Doctor Bloom cannot handle being alone with you, then she has trouble compartmentalizing her professional and personal feelings for you." And he'd rather she stay away entirely, even should she be capable. Her meddling with Will now would possibly undo everything Hannibal has worked so hard to nurture.

Will wrinkles his nose. “Most people don’t compartmentalize as well as I do,” he says, but it doesn’t sound like the brag it would be coming from anyone else. It sounds almost self deprecating. “Took me a while to figure it out, but I had to learn young. I don’t know if there's much of a difference in personal and professional feelings to compartmentalize. I think she’s just… uncomfortable around me. Thinks I’m too *unstable*. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Will spits the word like it burns. Hannibal imagines he’s been called *unstable* often enough it does.

He squeezes Will's hand before tugging him along back down the hall to leave the building altogether.

He knows what Will needs, now, however. "Why not tell me about your theories for this killer? I'm sure you'll feel better once you tell me."

If Will thinks *he's* unstable, then clearly he doesn't quite See Hannibal yet. Easily changeable, of course.

“I should head towards my classroom, I have a class,” he starts, but it’s half-hearted, nothing more than a disclaimer or footnote. “He loves those girls, Hannibal. Or he loves one of them, and in some way he loves all the others. He loved Elise Nichols. He couldn’t honor her, he was trying to apologize. I can *feel* him, but I just can’t see him yet. There’s something I’m missing and I don’t know what.”

Hannibal squeezes his hand again, thoughtful. "Perception's a tool that's pointed on both ends. I'm certain you'll find a way to see his face, good Will."

And he'll be certain to make it happen. After escorting Will to his class, he finds himself knowing exactly what to do with his night time schedule.

After all, a girl is a girl, Hannibal holds no feelings for them, could care less if they die so long as their flesh is prepared tastefully and beautifully. But for Will, beauty must be

something else, something *more*. He can give his dear special agent what he needs, the stark contrast between love for the crime itself and love for the one investigating.

Maybe some flowering almond, with a touch of white clover, and a bundle of lilac in her chest cavity would give Will an idea of how he feels.

Chapter End Notes

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter!
We'll see you next time!
Flowering almond, white clover, and lilac are all references to Victorian floral code!
Flowering almond- indiscretion, hope
White clover- "thinking of you"
Lilac- first emotions of love, memory

in the woods somewhere

Chapter Summary

An awful noise
Filled the air
I heard a scream in the woods somewhere

Chapter Notes

This chapter brings you some of the first bits of major canon divergence that will unfold as the fic goes on. Shout out to that one long ass comment on a different fic that reminded me we hadn't posted this chapter yet, ily bby. **-Bones**

"First bits of *major* of canon divergence" he says, like this whole thing isn't just "canon? Ehhh" in and of itself. I tease, I tease. Enjoy c4 as it was meant to be; in the middle of the night with a warm cup of coffee to keep you primed and ready lol. **-Salty**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scene is gruesome. That's the first word that comes to mind when Will reaches the displayed murder in Hibbing, Minnesota: *gruesome*. A taxidermied stag head with an impressive rack of antlers and a naked girl perched- no, *splayed* across like a prize. In the middle of an empty field, away from the world but open. Displayed. Something snarls in Will's chest at the sight, and he can't bring himself closer for a long moment.

"Stag head was reported stolen last night, about a mile from here," Jack tells him, but Will's focus is on the crows scattering away from where they crouched, picking at the poor, dead girl as the forensic team waves their arms about.

Crows are carrion birds, scavengers. They're known for eating almost anything. Will doesn't hate them, begrudge them for their nature. But watching them pick at the girl- it makes something ache and groan and howl in him. *This is not a place of honor*, he thinks, *nothing valued is here, indeed*.

"Just the head?" Will makes himself ask. Jack steps a few paces forward without a nod, but he still can't make himself do it.

"Minneapolis Homicide's already made a statement. They're calling him the Minnesota Shrike."

Will feels a little hysterical, honestly. “Like the bird?” he hears himself say faintly, but ignores the explanation that Jimmy decides to provide. He’s too busy finally making his way to the body, one unsteady step at a time. There are flowers bursting from the cavity in the body’s chest: small blooms of white clover and a veritable bouquet of small, beautiful flowers in pale purples and pinks that he doesn’t recognize.

“He wanted her found this way. It’s… it’s petulant,” Will says with sudden, rising certainty. Beside it are the confusing dual feelings of a deep disgust and rage, and a quiet awe. Part of him screams, roars against the dishonor done to this girl. But another part of him stares in wonder as he crouches down. He almost wants to reach out, to touch the picture displayed for them. “I almost feel like he’s mocking her. Or he’s mocking us.”

He is. Or perhaps he’s mocking *them*, because something in this piece - and it is a piece, like a sculpture or one of those interactive art installations. For as gruesome as it is, the composition is *artful* - calls to Will. It’s very petulant. But it does not say *you cannot find me*, it says *look at me, look at me*.

“Whoever tucked Elise Nichols into bed didn’t paint this picture,” Will says, and hopes he doesn’t sound as curious, as awed, as he feels. It is a painting, a showing.

Zeller sounds nauseous as he points out, “He took her lungs. I’m pretty sure she was alive when he cut ’em out.”

“Our cannibal loves women. He doesn’t want to destroy them. He wants to consume them, to keep some part of them inside,” Will realizes. He stands and moves away as understanding washes over him. This girl is not the subject of the picture. The stag head is, the flowers are, her death is. She’s nothing more than the vessel to hold it all together. “This girl’s killer thought that she was a pig.”

“You think this was a copycat?” Jack asks, stopping in his careful fleeing, all his attention on Will like the weight of the sky.

“The cannibal who killed Elise Nichols had a place to do it and no interest in- in something so *public*. So, he has a house, or two, or a- a cabin, something with an antler room.” Understanding washes over Will in waves but he finds himself staring back at the body covered in flowers. The words tumble out of him fast, too fast for him to think them through, sort them out right. “He has a daughter. The same age as the other girls. Same-same hair color, same eye color, same height, same weight. She’s an only child. She’s leaving home. He can’t stand the thought of losing her. She’s the important one.”

“And the copycat?”

The white water rapids pouring through his head become a slow, steady stream. Will’s throat feels suddenly dry, but not like he’s about to throw up. Not like he’s disgusted. No, the thing in his throat catching his breath before he can take it is not disgust or fear or revulsion- it’s a sick kind of admiration, an acknowledgement of something horrible and beautiful in the same scene.

“He’s peacocking,” Will says after a moment. “He’s putting on a display. He wants attention, acknowledgement. Not just from everyone, he copied the idea for a reason. He’s mocking us but he also wants someone’s attention. Maybe ours, maybe not. He’s- well, like- like a peacock. Kind of like a gift.”

“Are you saying he giftwrapped this scene for us?” Beverly asks him loudly over Jack, trying to peer at him from her spot by the work of art.

“That’s what it looks like,” Will agrees over his shoulder, “Get Hannibal to make a profile.”

He goes back to the motel room he got on Jack’s dime. Well, the FBI’s, but it might as well be the same thing. He has the sudden, overwhelming need for a nap. Instead of collapsing on the honestly passable bed, he makes himself shower, then he eats a granola bar he finds in his backpack he’s pretty sure he didn’t put in there. Considering the thing is definitely homemade, Will wouldn’t doubt that Hannibal had somehow managed to get his hands on his emergency go bag and tucked it in there.

But he’s too tired to be more than grateful, and he finally lets himself crash onto the bed and into the arms of Morpheus by early evening. He dreams of a stag, with dark arching branches that make up a truly impressive set of antlers and feathers like a crow. He wonders if it has a crow’s wings too, but the forest it watches him from is too dark and shaded to tell. It watches him with big black eyes and for all that he feels like prey, he isn’t afraid.

He doesn’t wake until morning, and when he does, it’s to knocking on his motel door. Light floods into the pitch dark room and Will squints as he opens the door to a familiar face. “What’re you doing here?”

“Jack called me after you left the crime scene yesterday,” Hannibal greets, voice low and gentle in the early golden light. He looks well-rested and pleased to see Will, too. “Good morning, Will. You look worse for wear. May I come in?”

“Wow, thanks,” Will drawls sarcastically, but he lets his friend in anyways, “You look great, too. I thought Jack was just going to have you draw up a profile for the copycat?”

“Yes, and then he mentioned needing you to be sociable.” For all the gentleness Hannibal is capable of, he has a way of disguising his distaste in a way only Will can truly make out. “I managed to free myself and decided to come help you. I brought breakfast, as well.”

He pulls two glass containers from his bag, clearly freshly made. Which means Hannibal probably got himself a fancy hotel somewhere to cook this in house just for him. Just for *Will* again.

“I don’t need to be sociable, that’s what I have you for,” Will grumbles under his breath but gratefully leads Hannibal to the little table in his room. “Thank you, though. The scene yesterday was…”

He shakes his head. He doesn’t have words for it. Not so soon after waking up, at least.

"Which is why I hurried over," Hannibal assures, taking his seat before setting the eggs and sausages out for both of them, cutlery included. His eyes land on Will with a heavy weight, almost concern. "Eat your breakfast, Will, we can always discuss it later."

Will snorts, ducking his head so his friend at least can't see the rush of warmth flooding through him nearly so much. Hannibal has a way of doing small little shows of care that somehow don't feel like pity or charity. It makes his chest feel warm every time, and it's a little ridiculous. He feels like a child making their first friend in school.

"Thank you," he says, digging into the scramble of eggs and sausage contentedly, "This is really good. As always."

It is. There's something about the sausage, and he assumes it's a kind he's never had before. The texture is different and the flavor stronger, but Hannibal is a good cook and it tastes great.

When Will looks up after a too-long moment of silence, Hannibal is staring- *watching* him with a smile so pleased and wide it borders smug. If Will had to think back at any point in their friendship, he would have to say that this is the first *real* smile the older man has ever given him.

Hannibal has smiled before, derisive or amused little things that were always gone too quickly on a warm, yet stony face.

Will is content to eat in silence. Quiet breakfast with Hannibal is nothing new; if anything the routine of it manages to unwind the tension in his shoulders and neck that has lingered since the time scene the day before. The only thing missing, he thinks as he rolls his neck out with a small groan, is the dogs and Hannibal pretending not to sneak little bits of sausage to Clover.

Will sits back when he's done with his food to watch Hannibal. He can't help the curiosity nagging at him, so he licks his lips and asks, "Did- did you really come out here because Jack complained about me not being sociable?"

Hannibal, who had taken to looking at the rising sun with that faint boredom of life he always has, turns to Will with amusement. "Too clever for your own good, dear Will," he says with a curve of fondness. "I suppose it would be too much to say I came as quickly as I could when I heard you were back in Minnesota for this case?"

"Sometimes I think you care more about my social life than I do," Will says, equal parts amused and fondly exasperated as he shakes his head, "Besides. It was obviously a copycat. Not even the real Shrike. The most it did was make things… clearer. Like a photo negative."

Well, it had been obvious to him. On his way out, he had heard Zeller muttering about how it had to be the same guy. It felt so obvious that it wasn't, to Will. Then again, Zeller seemed to have something against Will and he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out why. Which wasn't a new experience, considering he spent 13 years in public schools in Louisiana as a very obvious other. But he didn't understand it then and he doesn't understand it now over a decade and a half later.

Hannibal hums lightly, resting his chin in one hand. He takes a moment to think, clearly mulling his questions over. There's no trace of doubt on his friend's face, even as he finally asks, "What was the defining factor?"

"Has Jack shown you the photos yet?" Will asks, blinking. "They were- they're completely different. When the Shrike killed Elise Nichols, he loved her. He wanted to honor her, and when he couldn't, he put her back as best he could. He tried to apologize. This copycat… he didn't care about the girl at all. He didn't see her as a person, she wasn't important. She was just- just a *prop* in the whole set up!"

He gestures as he talks and halfway through, he has to stand to pace in front of Hannibal and the table. When he finishes, he pauses with his hands in the air, rubbing his temples. He's worked himself up enough for a headache to start to set in, throbbing behind his eyes.

"He took her lungs while she was still alive," he finishes as he turns back to look at his friend, "It lacks all the mercy the Shrike had for Elise Nichols. It just doesn't fit."

"I picked up the file before coming to see you, but I merely thumbed through it," Hannibal admits, watching him with rapt attention. He leans back into his seat and crosses his legs, resting both hands on that knee. "I saw the flowers in her chest. What do you think of them?"

Will waves a hand, "I know. They're more important than the girl." He pauses, wincing at how that sounds, and amends, "More important to the killer, at least. They mean something, but I don't know what. A gift to whoever the copycat wants the attention of? I don't recognize the other ones, only the clover flowers."

"From what I saw of the pictures, one is definitely lilac and the other I would guess is a type of tree flower, though I'm sure we'll get more answers from the ones analyzing them." Hannibal pauses, shifts a bit in his chair before saying, "This killer is clearly aiming at either the team or the Minnesota Shrike, we should be careful going forward."

"I know," Will says with a frown, collapsing back into his own chair. He rubs at his throbbing temples again as he thinks. He doesn't understand why *now*. Why steal what little is known about the Shrike- and such incomplete information too- to use as a blueprint? The copycat clearly has designs on what he wants to do, so why do it like this? To himself, he mumbles, "It's practically gift wrapped."

"What do you mean?" Hannibal questions, packing the now-empty glass containers back into his reusable bag alongside the cutlery. "Surely you don't think this is a gift for Jack? It seems too delicate, in its own gruesome way, for that."

The idea makes a laugh bubble out of his chest. He shakes his head, smothering the sound under his hand and delighting in the scrape of his scruff against his palm. Will huffs out a breath, "No, obviously not. Not Jack. I don't think Jack realizes it's practically a gift. But I can only think of two ideas, and neither sound good. Jack certainly would be pissed about both."

"It's either for the Shrike, or it's for me," he winces, giving Hannibal a pained smile. "I'm sure you can imagine Jack's feelings on either. I'd rather not; I'm sure it would include lots of

shouting.”

“Let’s say it is a gift for you, Will,” Hannibal proposes gravely, looking at him intensely, as if the younger man could disappear or run off at a moment’s notice. “How will you respond, if you do at all?”

Will has to think for a long moment and the image of the stag, feathered and dark and imposingly tall, comes to the forefront of his mind as he closes his eyes. It watches him from the edge of the forest, beckons him closer. But it is massive, and Will is not; it knows more about him than he knows about it. It watches him, but Will can't watch back without a sharp eye in his head.

Opening his eyes, he heaves a sigh, "I don't know. What am I supposed to do about it if there's a killer out there who wants my attention? The copycat... he's an intelligent psychopath. He won't kill like this again. And right now, I'm supposed to focus on the Shrike, aren't I?"

The fact that the first two places he and Will investigate are a bust doesn't bother Hannibal so terribly as it seems to bother his friend. It's amusing, in a way, to watch Will chase after a shadow of who this killer is.

With a name like *Minnesota Shrike*, you would think the cannibal would feel emboldened and go out more often, but this mirror of his is patient. Unfortunately for him, the empath Hannibal is aligned with isn't. Hannibal has half a mind to drag Will out of Minnesota and back home, because he does so hate not having as much private time with his dear friend as before.

He doesn't, of course, because it would be like removing the winning greyhound from the track mid race. Instead, he hovers close, and keeps his hands to himself in public, enjoying the way Will seems to squirm when he would otherwise pull him back from the edge with a simple hand.

Will Graham needs to understand that affection and comfort can only be given out as a reward, or if Hannibal himself chooses to do so. It's fascinating to watch him get angry over it, almost desperate, even.

His friend looks like he’s going to vibrate out of his skin by the time they arrive at the third lead, a small portable building on low stilts and painted a garish orange-red. Sometimes, Will looks so uncomfortable in his skin that it's hard to imagine him in any state other than discomfited. But now, despite the clear anxiety and impatience, there’s something more settled in him. Something sure.

There’s something so curious about the empath.

“Third time’s the charm,” Will mutters once they’ve parked, unbuckling his belt and popping the door open. He looks back at Hannibal, catching his eye for only a moment. “What?”

“Peeking behind the curtain. I’m just curious how the FBI goes about its business when it’s not kicking in doors,” Hannibal says lightly, lying a bit. “And you look like you’re on the trail of this killer. Have you found his scent, finally?”

“Maybe. Hopefully. We found a piece of metal, shred from a pipe threader. Now we’re looking at the construction sites with that kind of metal, and kind of threads, we look for whoever the Shrike is,” Will explains. He beckons Hannibal out of the car, making a face at his own words. “It’s weird to talk about- about procedure. It’s been awhile.”

Hannibal follows him out and hums lightly. “Are you superstitious, Will?” Because the beast inside him isn’t. It’s a funny concept to be superstitious when you make fine dining out of human *pigs*. That and there’s no need to trust in any outside will of the world when he trusts his own skills.

“Superstitious?” Will gives him an offended frown, “I’m Southern, not superstitious. There’s a difference.”

“You’ll have to excuse me, I’m not sure I understand the difference,” Hannibal replies with a quirked brow, following his friend with hidden amusement.

Leading the way to the metal grate ramp up to the little building’s door, Will expounds, “Calling me superstitious makes it sound like I see a psychic on the regular and listen to horoscopes. It’s not like that. It’s just…”

He pauses outside the door, considering for a moment before he starts to list things off,” Things like painting porch ceilings blue, not cleaning on New Year’s, never seating thirteen people for dinner. Don’t go in the woods at night, don’t go outside in winter if you hear someone yelling your name, and naughty kids get eaten by the rougarou.”

“Ah, one of the many iterations of the *loup-garou*,” he answers contently, smiling at Will before knocking on the door. “Thank you for enlightening me, Will.” It’s a pleasure to have his dear friend share about his life. It’s always so much more fun to file things away for later, for when he needs to pry into the man’s comfort zone and force himself there again.

Will is just too beautiful *not* to be gently pulled apart at the seams, like an ill fitting shirt needing to be trimmed or tailored appropriately. He wants the empath’s skin to fit him like a glove, so that he may rest underneath it and borrow further in.

Something in him wants to *break* Will Graham.

“*Loup-garou*,” Will says under his breath, almost mockingly, the French rolling out of his mouth with surprising ease despite the slight twang that lingers there. He doesn’t give Hannibal a chance to react, because the moment the young secretary of the construction site opens the door, he demands, “We need to see your employment records for plumbers and other pipe workers.” Then, after a momentary pause, he pulls out his badge and tacks on, “FBI.”

Like the other two places, a routine starts as the girl lets them in and goes straight to her phone. Like a spooked gazelle, Hannibal hears her input a quick phone number, but stops

paying her any mind.

"Tell me again what it is we are looking for?" He knows explaining the task at hand will help Will relax, even if only slightly.

“I don’t know,” Will says simply, but he’s already going through the files with familiar ease. He’d said once that he’d been *on the force*, but he’s never acted like it. Will Graham has never looked or walked like an ex-cop or detective; he looks the part of the teacher he is, looks like a man who would rather spend time with his dogs than other people.

The empath shoves a handful of files into Hannibal’s hands unceremoniously. *Rude boy*, he thinks, but he can’t find it in himself to feel much more than burgeoning curiosity. Will continues as if he hadn’t paused in the slightest, “Anything, really. Abnormal things. I’ll know it when I see it.”

Hannibal gives a soft sigh as he lets Will pile papers in his arms before looking around for a box they could use. It’s not that he doesn’t understand how Will’s thought process works, but there are definitely times where his friend is more than capable of surprising, or better yet, intriguing him.

Hannibal knows better than to doubt Will, but he also doesn’t exactly want him to get everything he could get his hands on right away. So, he stalls the special agent as they dig through files and files of information, barely finding anything worth more than a passing glance.

“Garret Jacob Hobbs,” Will announces, turning to the secretary whispering rapidfire into the desk phone.

“He’s one of our pipe threaders,” she says after a momentary pause, looking Will up and down, “Those are all the resignation letters. Plumbers’ Union requires ’em whenever members finish a job.”

The special agent hums, looking down at the file contemplatively. “He has a daughter, doesn’t he?” he asks, though it sounds almost as if he’s asking himself. “Talks about her, but not much? You know how protective fathers are.”

“…Might have,” the secretary answers with more reluctance. “I don’t know, I don’t keep company with these people.”

Will hums at that, and if Hannibal wasn’t watching him so closely, he might have missed the way the other man winces at her phrasing, lips curling up slightly in a sneer.

“What do you see, Will?” he asks instead of pressing the secretary with nothing more than an annoyed stare. He wonders what the clue could be, what could possibly have set Will off so badly he chose to be sociable to the best of his abilities.

He gets a pained grimace-smile for his efforts, “He left a phone number but not an address. Everyone else left addresses, but not him. He doesn’t want it to be found- doesn’t want *her* to

be found. She's his, his- treasure, or something. He can't have just anyone having access to that, no. Hey, do you have an address for Garret Jacob Hobbs?"

The secretary gives Will a judgemental look, pursing her lips, but she turns back to her computer to type something. After a moment, she scribbles something down on a piece of torn scrap here and holds it out without moving from her desk chair. "Here."

Hannibal motions for the woman to finish and help pack the car, which she does quickly, seemingly wanting them to finally leave her and her office alone. It's a perfect enough excuse to look the phone number over again and memorize it.

After all, it's always infinitely more interesting to see what will happen when he throws a wrench in Will's way and observes how he reacts. Maybe, if he feels merciful, he'll help in the end.

Will arrives outside of the Hobbs' residence with a pounding headache and growing sense of dread sinking deep in his stomach. There's a muteness clinging to his skin and he thinks, *someone is going to die here today*.

It's not a prediction, nor a promise. He's always been odd, he knows, and for all that people have called him psychic - a ridiculous thought, really - he knows it's something far more mundane than that. Will has always been good at picking up on and predicting conclusions to patterns. He sees them everywhere and they link up so smoothly in his head. He's learned to trust his instincts over the years; his instincts are usually right.

And right now, there's something screaming in him that there will be no peaceful arrest. Someone is going to die. It feels like an inevitability that sinks through his stomach and into his feet, his lungs, his very veins and arteries.

So Will calls Jack to send back up, swallows down an aspirin dry to take the edge off of his headache, and turns to Hannibal to offer, "You might want to stay in the car."

Something tells him his friend won't listen, but he ignores it. He gets out of the car and pretends it doesn't feel like walking into his own funeral as he approaches the porch of the Hobbs' residence. There's a sick sense of vindication when Garret Jacob Hobbs shoves his own wife from the door, bleeding out from her throat.

Will doesn't remember how old he was, the first time he understood the concept of death. He must have been young, too young to remember it, and lost amongst the pages of second hand books his pa had given him to keep him occupied. Somewhere in there, in the thin, ephemeral days of childhood, he'd figured out that people died. That some people killed each other and sometimes you just died anyways. Somewhere in the pages of rights and wrongs and moral quandaries simplified for children, Will had picked out his own understanding of death, the way all kids must eventually do.

He's not a child anymore and it's not the first time he's watched anyone die, but something about it feels different when Mrs. Hobbs' hand clings to his forearm and his shaking - always

shaking, a constant tremor he's had for so long he forgets when it started - hands unable to stem the flow of warm, sticky blood. There's no sense of triumph in feeling her die under his hands, not because of them but in spite of them.

It should be harder than it is to push himself off his blood-soaked knees and pull his gun from its holster, but it isn't. It's easy. Will has never managed to shoot anyone, could never find the *nerve* for it, but he was a cop for years and the practice of the motions are etched as far into his skin and bones as his own damn name. It's easy to kick down the door, because he was stabbed in his shoulder, not his hip. It's easy to follow the sound of desperate crying into the kitchen.

It's a lot less easy to look Garret Jacob Hobbs in the eye, his own daughter pinned to his chest with one arm and a knife to her throat in the other.

Garret Jacob Hobbs loves his daughter. Will knows this with certainty, knows the truth of it like he knows up from down. He killed Elise Nichols and seven other girls who look just like his daughter so he wouldn't have to kill her. She is the most important thing in his life and he is so terrified that she'll be leaving him someday, as all children must, that he wants to keep her inside him. He wants to bury her in his own ribcage, nestled between his heart and lungs, but he can't. So he kills and eats eight girls just like her in a desperate hope to keep some part of her ingrained in him, grafted onto him. So he won't lose her. So he doesn't have to kill her.

Will knows this. He understands this. Garret is shaking, and Will knows it's because he's never wanted to kill his daughter. The most precious thing he's made, that he's ever known. He doesn't understand why, when Will lifts his gun in turn, the man still tries to slit his own daughter's throat.

It alights a burning rage in his chest, and he shoots the man in the shoulder. It isn't where he'd been aiming, but Will's hands are shaking far too much to hit the mark. And when Garret Jacob Hobbs tries again, he shoots him eight more times in the chest. It's enough to make him finally go down against the corner cabinets, but a dark, angry part of Will's mind screams, *one for every girl*.

Because it's not as if Will hasn't thought about it, killing someone. It's not like he hasn't wanted someone dead before. For all that he had been a quiet kid, he had not been a *calm* one. When he was young, before they'd figured out what was off with him, he'd been prone to fits of rage and violence. Too many thoughts and feelings crowded into one small child too bony and weird for his own good often lead to screaming and throwing rocks and sticks and, in one case, books at playgrounds and parks and classrooms. Even now, as an adult, Will knows he has a nasty temper. He's sworn at other drivers and wished them into horrific car crashes at least twice in the past week for shitty driving alone.

But while the concept of hating something so much you have to destroy it, the anger that shakes him right now isn't because he can't conceive of Garret Jacob Hobbs murdering 8 girls and trying on another. It's because he can't fathom looking at someone he loves more than the world, needs to keep safe and near him more than he needs the sun or air, and destroying that. Killing her.

So now Will is on his knees, trying to breathe through the shock and the rage and the horror, and trying not to let the girl at his side bleed out from the almost hesitant slice into her neck. His hands are shaking too hard to hold enough pressure against her throat and he turns his head to watch Garret Jacob Hobbs die whispering, "*See?*"

Will feels like there's a part of him dying, instead. He's breathing hard, or barely breathing at all, and he thinks that if he lets this girl die, he might just die with her.

Hannibal cuts through between the two of them and reaches down for the girl's neck, moving Will's hand with his other, steady one. He holds firm over the gushing blood and kneels next to the empath. "Will," he calls softly, the hand that had held his moving, and for a moment he mourns the loss, until it pulls him securely against the older man's side. "Will, focus on me."

Will tears his eyes from the body of Garret Jacob Hobbs, doesn't let himself linger on the still breathing, still living body of his daughter, and focuses on the familiar planes and lines of Hannibal's face. His hands aren't just shaking, he realizes, his whole body is. He tries to nod at his friend, but his face is tacky with blood. *Whose?* he wonders. Instead of lingering on the thought, he reaches one trembling hand down to wrap around the girl's hand and squeezes it tightly in his.

She'll live, he tells himself, she'll live.

"Jack will be here soon," Hannibal assures like the lighthouse guiding him to port. His friend's hand slides up from his shoulder to the back of his head, tucking him in even closer. Almost like he wants to shield Will, but he knows better. There's no shielding from the aftermath.

Will breathes, forces his lungs to stop working in overtime and settle. Looks down to the girl - she has a name, but he doesn't know it and that makes guilt stew in his chest, oddly - and then back to Hannibal. A hand squeezes his weakly and just like that, Will finds his words when he looks down into the bluest eyes he's ever seen. "You'll be okay," he promises her, instead of the '*I'm sorry'* that wants to tumble out of his mouth, "Shh, you'll be okay. We've got you."

The EMTs get there shortly after, it's a blur of Hannibal guiding him between people so Will can stay focused on the girl, hand in hand with hers still. His friend helps him into the ambulance before following him in and placing an arm tightly around Will's waist. He stays silent, but grounding.

Will clings to the girl with one hand and digs his fingers into Hannibal's shirt along his side with only a spare thought for the blood he's staining it with. He closes his eyes and resolutely doesn't let himself fall apart on the way to the hospital.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, Will at one point thinks “This place is not a place of honor… nothing valued is here, indeed.” which is a reference to long term nuclear waste warning messages, specifically “This place is not a place of honor… no highly esteemed deed is commemorated here… nothing valued is here.”

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter! We’ll see you next time!

shrike

Chapter Summary

I couldn't utter my love when it counted
Ah, but I'm singing like a bird 'bout it now
And I couldn't whisper when you needed it shouted
Ah, but I'm singing like a bird 'bout it now

Chapter Notes

This chapter is brought to you by us crying over how much we love Abigail and her dynamic with Will and Hannibal. Also, questions over if murder is moral sometimes. (It is.) This chap is a nice wind down buffer after the last one, so I hope you enjoy! **-Bones**

I am ill but the writing grind dont stop BUDDYYYYYY. Abigail deserved a lot more and we have a lot of feelings about how Hannibal coulda been a better dad, alongside Will. So hey! We get to explore that rn! **-Salty**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's something unsettling about watching someone in a coma, Will finds. Abigail Hobbs, barely 18 and out of high school, doesn't look dead in her hospital bed, but it would be a lie to say she looks truly alive, either. She's pale and still and not breathing on her own; in the dim lights of the late night, she looks like a ghost. So despite the late hour, Will sits on the couch across from her bed and watches her like a church grim.

He doesn't know how long he watches the artificial rise and fall of her chest until he hears the steady clack of hoofbeats against linoleum. When Will turns his head towards the door out into the hallway, he watches the beast walk past. The stag is huge, fur and feathers black and shiny as an oil spill in the dim light. Its massive antlers must take up the whole hallway and, curiously, he finds himself helpless but to stand and follow the great creature into the hallway. He watches it look back at him before turning around a corner.

Just as Will steps forward to follow the thing down the winding corridors, the hallway lights start to flicker off. He blinks his eyes open to the familiar timber of Hannibal's voice, reading softly. He's laying on the couch, with a blanket tucked over him, across from Abigail's bed, where the man in question sits and reads aloud.

"Is that the Iliad?" Will wonders, mouth dry and eyes still heavy. There's something that feels right about watching Hannibal read to Abigail, even if she's not awake or aware enough to

enjoy it properly.

"Good morning, Will," his friend greets in reply, smiling tiredly. "It is. Reading to comatose patients is said to help alleviate their worries and help them return sooner." He lets the silence between them rest for a long moment, staring at Abigail.

After what seems like both too long and not long enough, Hannibal finally turns to him. "How long have you been here now, Will?"

“I don’t know,” he answers honestly, “I don’t remember falling asleep.”

He sits up slowly to avoid the pounding headache that comes with moving or standing too quickly and plucks his glasses off the arm of the couch. He definitely doesn’t remember taking them off, and he can only assume it was Hannibal who did. Who must have laid the blanket over him, too. Will pulls his jacket back on, crossing to sit on the other side of Abigail’s legs.

Abigail Hobbs, Garret Jacob Hobbs’ golden ticket. The daughter he loved so much he had to kill her. Will doesn’t think he will ever understand that. He doesn’t think it’s typical to fatherhood but then again, he’s no one’s father. Abigail isn’t his daughter, no matter the lingering want in his chest. He doesn't love her, he doesn’t know her. He’d like to, he realizes. He wants to know her, to talk to her. To apologize.

He takes her hand in his, unable to stop himself from asking, “Do you think she’ll hate me, when she wakes up?”

"I think her emotions will be varied and possibly unstable at times as a result of *everything* that happened," Hannibal corrects. "I don't believe there is a cause to hate you for choosing her life over Jacob Hobbs'."

His friend closes the book in his hands and sets it aside to look at the empath head on, like the car the deer are too afraid to look away from. His eyes bear into Will with the weight of a question he seems to refuse to ask.

"Perhaps we should go back to your home for some time, Will."

“That’s such a therapist response,” he scoffs, if only because derisive humor is the easiest emotion to pluck from the pile in his chest threatening to strangle him. It’s worn round and soft, no sharp edges left, like tumbled sea glass. This one cannot hurt him.

But Hannibal watches Will steadily, as unflinching as the moon. He can’t look away. It’s like he can see through the frosty glass he holds out in front of him like armor. It leaves him feeling exposed, pinned in place, but it’s unexpectedly nice, too. With a sigh, he sags.

“Fine,” he relents, finally dragging his gaze away from Hannibal’s patient watching, “I guess it wouldn’t be a bad idea to stop by. I have a go-to dog sitter, but I should still check in on the pack.”

“I’m certain they miss you as well, Will,” his friend assures, gently squeezing Abigail’s other hand as he stands. “I will drive, so you can focus on getting more sleep, as well.” Because of course Hannibal cares and worries so much it drips from his words like thick and heavy honey.

Will finds himself caught between the temptation to bask in it and the too-familiar urge to shy away, swallow the sensation away and ignore it. All the empathy in the world couldn’t make him better at dealing with his own emotions; it never could. Still, he manages a smile that only tugs up half his mouth and squeezes Abigail’s hand as well before he stands to follow Hannibal from the room.

“I don’t need more sleep,” he tells his friend once they enter the hallway and turn towards the elevators. It’s a lie, because exhaustion is tugging at his limbs even now, but Hannibal doesn’t need to know that. “I sleep fine. Plenty.”

The man rests a hand on the small of Will’s back and smiles knowingly, nodding along. “Of course,” he says with the faintest hint of sarcasm he can muster against the younger. Hannibal, however, doesn’t remove his hand even as they enter the elevator. “And yet, I will still drive.”

He’s struck with the wild, childish urge to bite the other man. Not violently or sensually, just the almost animalistic want to sink his teeth into Hannibal’s arm, suit jacket and all, until he’s conveyed his amused annoyance in full.

Maybe Will spends too much time alone with his dogs.

He shakes the thoughts away, snorting instead. For a fleeting second, he thinks he hears cloven hooves on tile, but the warm and grounding weight of Hannibal’s hand on his back pushes it away. He’s never really had recurring dreams before, and certainly not one’s that leave him so unsettled, but he chalks it up to his new consulting work with Jack. Still, the stag with its impressive antlers and crow feathers lingers in the forefront of his mind all the way until his friend guides him into the passenger seat of his Bentley.

Hannibal closes the door behind him gently before getting in, himself. He looks at Will as the car starts and offers a small smile. “Rest, Will. It’s a long drive.”

Despite wanting to argue, it’s hard to resist the urge when he knows the older man will keep him safe. He feels his eyes close and mind drift away before they’re even out of the parking lot.

Making sure Will is fed and clean is not as arduous a task as it would be for just anyone else, but Hannibal is *not* just anyone else. He was granted the title of Will’s best friend now, and taking care of his dearest Will is a simple, loving task.

It’s easy to usher the younger man into his car, then out and into his home. It is a rewarding challenge to feed Will and help him settle into bed so that Hannibal can take care of his pack. After all, the dogs, namely Clover, all care for and trust him as well.

However, the most difficult situation is being in the home as his friend sleeps, wanting nothing more than to settle his legs on either sides of him and wrap his hands around a slender, pale neck, so he can feel the breath there and finally listen to the fluttering bird in that ribcage. He wants to leave Will full of bites, of marks, and parade him around as *his*, finally.

A heavy burden, keeping his carnal desires to himself. He cannot rush his friend but a part of his heart longs for Will's flesh, for his blood, his love.

A heavy burden, indeed.

It's hours later, in the kitchen, that he hears Will stir with a gasp and shuffling. He pauses his cooking and listens for a bit, but when all he hears are shuddering breaths and nothing else, Hannibal calls out, "Will?"

"Shit!" he hears from the other room, before Will comes to the kitchen doorway, sweaty and looking vaguely ill. His hair is damp with it, and the strong, acrid scent of sweat hangs in the air without the sickly sweetness of fever. "Oh. You're still here?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies gently, deciding to treat Will carefully to be certain his friend doesn't flinch away from him due to whatever happened. He moves the pan away from the heat and turns the oven off. He would prefer going straight to Will to make sure his dear is alright, but instead he only turns to look. "I was going to make dinner and offer to drive back to the hospital together. Are you alright?"

Will blinks at him groggily, groaning. He runs a hand over his face, glasses nowhere to be seen. Without a proper response, he waves Hannibal off and disappears back into the other room. The younger man returns shortly before he can decide to follow him, dressed in a fresh shirt, glasses in place once more, and hair wilder than normal. It looks as if he's taken a towel to his hair to try and get rid of the sweat, though the stale smell of it still clings somewhat.

"Sorry," he says, sitting roughly in one of the chairs at the kitchen table. "I'm fine. 'S just a weird dream."

"Would you like to talk about it?" Hannibal quirks a brow in his direction before motioning for Will to sit at the table. "It's good to share, Will."

Maybe it has more to do with the creature under his skin wanting to know everything about how Will's beautiful mind works than real concern, but he would be lying if he didn't want to wrap around the younger and pull him close with comforting hands. He wants nothing more than to trap Will in his own mind and yet he would also like for Will to get *out* of the cage he seems to have made for himself.

Not for the first time, these feelings war in the back of his mind as he goes back to cooking.

"It's nothing," Will denies, and he can practically hear his friend shaking his head and rubbing his temples, as he always does when a headache descends on him. "I've just been having a- a recurring dream, I guess. Nothing really stands out, just weird. Probably just a stress dream, or something."

Yes, Hannibal wouldn't be surprised if his friend was having *stress dreams*. Will was sensitive- not in that he was particularly emotional or easily prone to flights of emotion, but he saw how the man took in absolutely everything around him. There was not a single thing that Will Graham heard, felt, saw, or touched that he didn't take note of, did not store away in that fascinating head of his. And Jack Crawford, for all that he was a good FBI agent, was not the kind of person who knew how to take such things into consideration beyond what it could do for him.

But *I* do, whispers the monster under his person suit. Oh, how he knows all the wonderful things he could do to Will, *for* Will.

He tamps it down a bit because he would rather Will not figure him out just yet, especially since he's not ready yet, not quite accustomed to taking the life of someone, deserving or not. Maybe one day his friend will be able to see people for the pigs that they are.

"Certainly, after everything that's happened," he agrees, focusing on the pan in front of him once again. "Have you ever thought of alternate hobbies to help you unwind better?"

Because if there was one thing Hannibal would love more than anything, it would be watching Will learn something new and teach it to their new daughter, once she awakens. A bit too far away still, but they can start preparing right away, can't they?

"I have hobbies!" Will sputters, sounding offended, "I fish and I have the dogs and- okay, so I haven't *played* it in a while, but I do still have a piano I know how to play, thank you very much. What other hobbies do I need?"

"Maybe take up painting, Will," Hannibal replies, amused as ever. "I know you have hobbies, I believe I spend enough time with you to see what they are," he tacks on teasingly because how can he not when Will is so distracted and on the defensive. It's impossible to resist, really.

"There's nothing wrong with exploring new options while keeping your favored ones for later."

"*Nothing wrong with exploring new options*. What if I like my current options just as they are?" his friend mocks, but he can tell the man isn't truly offended, nor means it rudely. It just happens that rudeness is Will's automatic setting. It would be quite annoying, if the man himself wasn't so charmingly interesting. After a moment, Will sighs and gives in, "Maybe I'll see about getting my piano tuned again."

"If you need assistance, I have a few friends who know their way around pianos," he offers, knowing full well that his friend will probably brush him off for a few days before he finally relents. Will is easy to read, for all that he tries to deny it. He *wants* so much to be cared for and clings on viciously to whoever gives it to him freely. It's almost surprising he hasn't asked to spend time at Hannibal's residence yet.

At least, it would be more surprising if Will weren't such a hermit who despises the city.

Will wrinkles his nose at him as he plates their dinner, but concedes surprisingly fast. “Maybe. I doubt there’s anyone in Wolf Trap who knows how. But I’m looking around by myself first. I know how picky you are.”

It truly is an ironic thing to say, considering how picky the teacher is himself. Hannibal just has *taste*.

“You know I’ll wait until you find someone,” he says instead of calling Will out for being the same as him, knowing it would probably start another episode of pouting from Will. “Now, better to eat before we leave, yes?”

It’s nothing complicated, just spinach and cheese stuffed chicken breasts with a small side of greens to be certain Will is eating well. He would prefer to give him a heart, something rich and flavourful, but this will do for now.

“Thanks,” Will says, and gives him another half smile as he digs into the simple meal.

Hannibal has always enjoyed the reactions people have to his food, long pork or otherwise; the wash of compliments and praise against him like a silk shirt has always been a decadent kind of joy. While his general etiquette and manners lack the refinement he prefers, Will’s enjoyment of his meals are just as wonderful. Though lacking in the effusive comments made by dinner party guests, his friend eats with a quiet enthusiasm and enjoyment Hannibal rarely encounters. Even without comment on the meal, never once has he doubted the younger man enjoys his food.

“Do-” the empath starts and stops, clearing his throat, “When do you think she’ll wake up? Abigail?”

It’s a difficult answer to give, because as much as Hannibal would love to comfort his friend and assure that everything will be fine… It’s a difficult thing to think about. He takes a short yet deep breath before sighing. “I believe Abigail is receiving all the help she can possibly receive to be able to come back,” he says thoughtfully. “And I believe the best thing to do is be there for her, when she does.”

What a difficult decision it is, to tell Will to remain patient when his friend is known for everything but.

Not wholly unsurprisingly, his friend deflates. He takes another bite and sighs once his mouth is clear, “I know. I just wish there was more I could do. It feels like my fault, sometimes. Isn’t it?”

“It isn’t.” Hannibal knows that much is true, if anyone should be blamed for Jacob Hobbs’ actions it should be himself, not that he feels any guilt over it. “You saved her life, Will. Remember that.”

“I killed her father, too,” Will points out, self deprecating. “I keep thinking about it. I killed him. Life went back to normal. It doesn’t feel like things should go back to normal after that.”

Hannibal sets his cutlery down to look at Will better, finally getting an idea of what those dreams of his are. Will's poor imagination can't let go of Jacob Hobbs and Hannibal both hates and admires it. He wants to dig into Will's brain and take the dead cannibal out to be replaced with himself.

Instead, he sighs. "You cannot blame yourself for saving Abigail, Will. It was either her or Hobbs, would you have preferred apprehending the man alive with the possibility of losing her?"

The empath puts down his own fork and, after a moment of silence, softly admits, "No. I just wish I shot him sooner."

Something thrilling bursts out into Hannibal's heart, stronger than the beast under the flesh suit usually is, greedy and hungry and powerful. He wants to drag Will into a biting kiss, wants to dig his teeth into soft flesh and rip it apart. Instead, he sighs softly and sets a hand on his friend's.

"There's nothing more to be done about Jacob Hobbs, Will." Nothing more than to rip him out of the young man's head. "We should be more focused on Abigail's recovery, seeing as she *is* healing quickly. There is sense in the feeling of righteousness one can get out of killing a monster, Will. That is not something you should fear."

Will's fingers twitch under his and he shakes his head, standing. Though his kitchen is certainly smaller than Hannibal's it has enough space for him to start to pace- and for Winston to trot in from the living room to nose at his thigh. "I'm not afraid of it, that's the issue. Or- I *liked* killing Hobbs, Hannibal. It felt *just*. It's not supposed to. It was wrong, I know it was wrong, but- I don't feel wrong for it, and I'm supposed to."

Hannibal stands to put himself in Will's path and stop him. He knows when his friend is overthinking it too much, when things get so stressful he can spiral into a rage. "Will, you *know* what happens to rabid dogs, you must. Do you feel the urge to kill someone at random ever since? No? Then you know your own limits."

He takes a heaving breath, poor thing got himself all worked up. Will nods, visibly grounding himself as he reaches forward to cling to Hannibal's jacket sleeve. His other hand falls to rest on Winston's head, where the dog sits obediently pressed against his thigh.

"Okay," he says, sounding as if the weight of the world has been dropped onto his shoulders, or perhaps even removed from it. "Can we go back to the hospital? See Abigail again? Read to her, or something. I'm sure she's bored, wherever she is right now."

Hannibal could kiss Will now, willingly ruin what they have, ruin *Will* for no other reason than wanting to consume the younger man. He doesn't. Instead, he pulls his friend into a hug with his free arm. Will fits comfortably against him, even with the lack of large height difference, and it warms something deep within him that he decides to leave lying for now.

"Of course, Will. Help me store dinner and we can finish eating it at the hospital, as well."

Chapter End Notes

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter! We'll see you next time!

like real people do

Chapter Summary

About that night
The bugs and the dirt
Why were you digging?
What did you bury
Before those hands pulled me
From the earth?

Chapter Notes

Man these bitches gay. Gay as fuck. Also enjoy the students, it's been fun writing them every now and then. **-Salty**

The body farms at the University of Tennesee are real, and yes I was very disappointed to find out they're not available to the public. Understandably so, but I want to roam a field of dead and decomposing bodies, dammit! As for okra: I've never had it and the texture scares me, but my Nana is from Louisiana and both her and my mom looooooove okra. As of posting this, we actually have a container of gumbo sitting in the fridge from my Nana. Cajun Will will be a minor theme throughout fics bc I love it so much <3 **-Bones**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Did you guys see Professor Graham today? He looked so pale.”

“I mean, he always looks pale?”

“No, dumbass, like *sickly* pale.”

“Maybe he has a cold or something.”

“Or *maybe* it’s because of that case! You know, the one in Missouri- you heard about it, right?”

“Minnesota, not Missouri.”

“Same thing. Anyways, I heard he caught *and* took down the killer himself! Isn’t that awesome?”

“Don’t you ever hear the agents say taking a life isn’t easy?”

“Well, *that* would explain why he looks like, well, y’know. Shit.”

“He looked distracted, too.”

“Yeah but *that* could be because of that Doctor, too.”

“Do you think he knows?”

“Doctor Silver Fox? Probably. Has anyone managed to figure out who he is? Do you think he has a younger brother? Or older, I’m not picky.”

“Ew, not the time. I think Dustin said he thought he met him before. But-”

“But his word can never be trusted, yeah. At least, not for remembering faces.”

“I hate to be an asshole-”

“No, you don’t.”

“*But* do you guys think Doctor Silver Fox is interested in Professor Graham the same way, uh, Doctor Bloom is?”

“Oh, come on! He’s been feeding the guy for months now, if he wanted something from Professor Graham-”

“Doctors can be patient!”

"You're only saying that because your mom is a doctor and she hasn't badgered you about graduating yet."

“I also think you mean doctors *have patients*. Don’t look at me like that, I’m agreeing with you! Doesn’t Professor Graham kind of remind you of a stray dog? Ply him slowly with food and don’t make any sudden movements or he’ll run?”

“I don’t know, he *did* shoot someone. Not the point, though. Do you really think Doctor Silver Fox is spending time with Professor Graham *like that*?”

“I mean… last week I asked for an extension on that paper that was due Friday. And he said *yes*.”

“Oh god, he totally has the hots for Doctor Silver Fox. He probably figured one less paper to grade meant more time together.”

“You guys are disgusting. I’ll have to ask for an extension too, though, I can’t figure out the latest assignment.”

“You’re just happy he cares less about grading our papers now and you don’t actually care why.”

“I told you, I can’t fail! I *will* send that doctor a gift basket no matter what, once we figure out who he is!”

“Well, I don’t think he’s from around here. There’s not a lot of doctors in Quantico that don’t work here and I checked LinkedIn. None of them look like Doctor Silver Fox.”

“Why do you have a LinkedIn?”

“Why do you *not*?”

Will visited the University of Tennessee, once. It was during his time in college, when he wrote his forensic psychology dissertation. The body farm has been a wide, sprawling thing. Other students had left early, some pale faced and horrified and others gagging. Will had thought there was something fascinating about it, something to be said about a human created and manned farm of rotting and decaying bodies spread across acres of land. Careful twine grids of bones being excavated upon bodies half mummified by natural means.

He never went back, because his focus had been in the psychological aspect of forensics rather than the physical, but he’d thought about it occasionally during his time in university. He was never able to decide if it had felt like the depths of cruelty or kindness standing there, but it had felt deeply *human*.

Standing in front of shallow graves filled with half decayed bodies and an abundance of white chanterelles, the same feeling hits Will.

“OK, we’ve got nine bodies, various stages of decay, and as you can see, all very well fertilized,” Jimmy says, and he finds himself wondering how the man always manages to be so upbeat when standing over dead bodies. Then again, he supposes, forensics must draw the weirdest of people by the very nature of the job. And Jimmy is very good at his job.

Will looks over the scene, over the unearthed graves and the arms held out as if proffered to the sky. Each hand held aloft has a well-maintained IV catheter held in place and he can’t help but wonder how often the line was flushed and changed, the medical tape holding it all down replaced. How often did this gardener come and tend to his crop, how faithfully?

Buried alive, he muses, only half aware of the forensic team in front of him and Hannibal at his back. His friend must look odd, in a pressed suit in the middle of a forest. But no, that’s not the point here; he wrestles his mind away from the urge to turn and look and back to the bodies. Buried alive, in shallow graves, *kept* alive with IV fluids and a breathing tube system.

“No physical restraints?” Will asks.

“Just dirt,” replies Jimmy.

Beverly cuts in with a tired voice, “The other end of the air-supply system comes up over there.” She points to a tree with an umbrella covering up the air intake hole. “It isn’t a very considerate clean air solution, which clearly wasn’t a priority, ’cause he isn’t lazy.”

“No, he’s not,” Will agrees grimly. “He just didn’t care about that. Them being able to breathe was less important than whatever is in the IV lines.”

Finally, he turns back to look at Hannibal behind him. He was right; the man looks deeply incongruous to the forest around them, but in a way that was wholly unexpected. Hannibal, alone, could fit in with the forest. He’s never noticed it until now, but the shape angles and smooth planes of the doctor’s face gives him a timeless, untouchable appearance. Like the visage of a spirit stepped out into the human realm. But the plaid of his suit and the paisley tie and his shiny, still pristine even now, oxfords tank the image completely.

He reminds him of the urban myths about finding a pristine set of stairs to nowhere in the middle of the woods.

It’s a lot amusing, if he’s honest. Will has to shove the association out of his mind before he laughs, looking up briefly to meet Hannibal’s eyes before he settles his gaze on the shell of his ear instead.

“Ready?” he asks, “For me to, um, do my thing?”

Hannibal nods and steps up closer, hands in his pockets. “Of course, Will. Do you need me to tell Jack to get everyone out?” The way he moves, and talks, makes it clear his friend is not uncomfortable within the nature around them. Like he’s in tune with it, or an invasive animal that strives in the new environment.

It’s soothing, too, the way he asks just the right questions without derision or *professional curiosity*. He nods, “Please.”

With that, he turns back to look into the graves full of mushrooms and something that used to be human. That used to be alive. Now, they’re only filled with something half alive, but never quite dead. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and a moment to appreciate the knowledge that Hannibal is at his back if he gets too far in, and finally allows the pendulum to swing.

The sounds of police and forensics and bystanders all muffle as he steps back, back in time and back into the man who did this. The man he was when he did this. He opens his eyes and marvels. Eight perfect planters full of mushrooms, of chanterelles and St George’s and even a few fairy ring mushrooms, lie before him, a ninth prepared for soil and fertilizer. For growth, for reaching into the earth and each other to take what is needed, to *sing*.

I do not bind his arms or legs as I bury him in a shallow grave, he thinks as he shovels dirt over the fruiting block. It isn’t hard; he has given this gift to the earth and to the fruiting block eight times before, he is a practiced hand at it. He leaves the face and a hand uncovered by soil and fertilizer. *He’s alive. But he will never be conscious again*.

He kneels, inserts the breathing tube and prepares the IV line. The dextrose will support mycelial growth, even more so than the PDA he mixed into the soil before he refilled the planter to cover the fruiting block. *He won’t know that he’s dying. I don’t need him to. This is my design*.

He secures the arm left above ground to the rebar, away from crawling insects and contaminants to the dextrose supply. He looks down to the fruiting block and-

And Will is pulled brutally from one mind to another, one he can't even be sure is his own, and Garret Jacob Hobbs' cloudy dead eyes and blood stained shirt watch him back accusingly. He gasps, jerking back slightly and only staying upright because he is on his knees by this shallow, uncovered grave and *there is a hand gripping his arm, reaching from the earth to-*

Hannibal grabs his shoulder and gently pulls Will back as he calls for Jack, just as the man in the grave starts gasping for air. "Will," he says afterwards, trying to pull him further away. "Jack, EMTs!"

There's a rush of movement as an officer starts panicking, rushing over and yelling at them not to touch the man.

Will lets himself be pulled to his feet, pressing back against a tree as he watches in something like horror and fascination and awe all at once. A chest full of mushrooms heave as the man breathes and he feels his lungs constrict in tandem. He can't look at this, he can't look away.

Hannibal has a hand on his arm and his other one comes up to grip at it hard, fingers digging and curling into the smooth fabric of the older man's nice suit sleeve. The serene calm and cold regard of the man who did *this* is still pressed along his spine, the back of his head. So close he can practically taste him, choke on him.

"Will," Hannibal says again, stepping in front of the scene to block his view. "You need to breathe. Focus on me, I'm not leaving." His other hand comes up to rest on the empath's shoulder and his friend's hands are warm and sturdy, grounding. They don't leave him, even when his breathing calms down.

"Now, why don't you try to think of those pups you teach at the academy?"

Will can't help the way he blinks, processes, and then balks. "Wha- I'm sorry, *what* pups?" he asks, voice rougher than he'd prefer, but too shocked to care much. It gets his attention on his friend rather than the not-corpse easily, though. "Are you calling my *students* my *pups*?"

He's not sure if that makes him the bigger dog in charge of taking care of them, or the handler. Or which is more offensive. He can't decide whether to be offended or amused, either.

Hannibal gives him an amused, little smile in turn, and only replies with, "Are you trying to deny it?" Which is the most nonanswer possible.

Sometimes, Will kind of hates his best friend. Unfortunately, he likes him too much to do something insane like drop his entire life and move across the country to avoid them. He thinks Hannibal would just follow him there anyways; it doesn't irk him as much as it should.

He settles for giving him a withering glare and an honest answer, "More of them are asking for extensions, which hasn't happened in weeks. I can't decide if they're starting to slack, or

just actually taking the workload seriously. At least some of them are actually managing better grades."

"Does it matter then, if their grades are getting better. Surely it seems like the added time helps them better understand." Hannibal rubs his thumb over Will's shoulder, looking more fond and amused than anything mean. He sounds genuinely fond of Will's students, like he knows something the professor doesn't.

He decides he's better off not knowing.

Softly, so Jack and the forensic team not more than seven feet away can't hear them, Will admits, "I saw Hobbs. In the grave. Not- not just an association, I wasn't just *thinking* about him. I *saw* him, full on hallucination style. I don't- I don't think that's a good thing."

Hannibal's smile drops, but he doesn't pull away. Just as quietly, he asks, "Would you rather Jack not know?"

"If Jack knows, he's going to try and send me to a shrink again," he says, wrinkling his nose. There's a long list of things he would rather do than see a therapist not limited to having a heart attack, having to saw off his own foot, and returning calls to the very few cops down in New Orleans who still occasionally try to call him on holidays. "Maybe I just need more sleep. I've heard sleep deprivation can make you hallucinate."

Will can't remember the last time he slept well, through the whole night without waking up sweaty and panicked from odd nightmares. That probably isn't very good for his overall health. Unfortunately, it's not entirely new.

Nightmares and sleep deprivation and paranoia had been what made him turn in his badge and leave a city he loved. He'd already felt better in Virginia by the time he found Teddy, still just a puppy, and started working at the Academy. He'd really love to not have to stop and restart his whole life again just because he's bad at handling the stress of fieldwork.

"Come stay with me when we go back, Will, a new environment could help," Hannibal orders more than offers as usual. Will really should mind more than he does.

"So, I finally get to see where you hide away?" he asks, amused. "Guess I can't refuse then. Though Jack will probably make me debrief first."

He'd really rather not, but he can already see the man starting to glance their way. He doesn't want to have to look at Jack - or more accurately, his shoulder - and explain to him that their killer couldn't have cared less about the people he was killing. No, that he only cared about them as fertilizer, as *fruiting blocks*, like the world's most fucked up miniature mushroom farm kit. He knew Jack wouldn't like that answer at all.

Honestly, Will isn't entirely sure he knows what kind of answer Jack *would* like. Asking probably wouldn't clear it up either.

"And you know I will be there. Unfortunately, Jack will be displeased as usual." Hannibal doesn't mind keeping his voice lowered for that, rudeness and bite directed at the man in

question. It seems he's able to drop the niceties when he's necessarily annoyed.

Will doesn't stop the snort that escapes, turning and looking out into the forest. "Thank you," he mumbles after a moment, finally letting go of Hannibal's sleeve to stuff his hands into his jacket pockets. He can't help but feel self conscious, clinging to his friend like a frightened child clings to a treasured stuffed bear. He feels a bit ridiculous.

His eyes scan the crowd of bystanders, the cops and the families of the poor boys who had come across the garden- the graves during their hike. He watches them leave, gaze catching on a woman with bright red curls and- is that a camera?

"Hannibal?" he says, memorizing her face with furrowed brows, but avoiding cold, not-quite-but-almost malicious eyes, "I think someone is taking pictures of us, over there. By the caution tape."

Hannibal turns around, looking for a moment before locking onto the person Will pointed out. "Let's leave, Will."

It's not that inviting people into his abode is odd, after all, Hannibal has hosted plenty of dinner parties and other such events in his dining room. No, the feeling in his chest is something new but not entirely uncomfortable. It's a warmth that starts deep in his heart and flares through him the longer he thinks on it.

No, having Will inside his home as a guest fuels a greedy creature that wants to make the empath his. It's a difficult thought *not* to entertain, but he resists as he leads the way to his kitchen, disrobing himself of all but his shirt and vest.

They are in *his* domain, after all, Hannibal can get away with being more open about himself here. He wonders if Will wants to feel comfortable in the den of a predator, or if he feels more at ease knowing another kind of beast can't get to him anymore.

Escaping Jack is never easy, after all.

"What would you like to eat, Will? I can keep it simple if you'd like." A good meal always seems to melt away his anxious thoughts, like the pleasantness of meat feeds Will's own beast. Maybe it soothes the shadow of Jacob Garrett Hobbs, even.

When he looks to where Will stands, having followed him into his large, open kitchen, he can't help but find the sight odd. Incongruous, but not in such a way that he looks out of place. Incongruous in that he fits so very well in Hannibal's kitchen, in his home, despite his worn flannel and scuffed work boots and the way his shoulders hunch up on himself. It is odd only because Will fits as if he has been the missing puzzle piece this whole time- only he hadn't realized anything was missing until he found it.

Like the extra screw in a set of furniture you build, before you realize that the screw was not extra at all only when you find the hole it was meant to go in to keep all your other hard work from falling apart.

“I’m not picky,” Will says with a shrug. He seems to debate himself for a moment before leaning against the island on his forearms. From anyone else, it would sound like a lie. But Will has never denied or turned his nose up at anything Hannibal has made for him. His dear friend plucks off his glasses, pesky things that he thinks the profiler might not even need, and tucks them in the breast pocket of his jacket. “Unless you have okra? Haven’t had it since I moved to Virginia.”

Now that Hannibal has this missing piece in his home, it’ll be incredibly difficult to let Will leave. No matter, he can find a solution for that another time. Instead, he arches a brow in thought and can’t remember ever cooking with *okra*. “I’m afraid I don’t, but I can get someone to bring some to us within the next half hour.”

He knows why he says it, even if he hadn’t thought of it before the words left him, which is a new experience. Hannibal knows exactly what he wants from Will. “Why don’t you show me how to make it, then?”

Will laughs and the line of tension in his shoulders eases. “It’s not hard, but sure. It’s one of the first things I learned how to make for myself as a kid. My pa used to say there was a time the only vegetable he could get me to eat was okra.”

Each new morsel of information he learns about Will is like a gift, a treasure he wants to be sure no one else can witness. This man makes him so very greedy. There is a beast lurking under his skin, perhaps the very same kind as the one Hannibal himself hides. The difference is that he has already come into himself, become the beast under a well made person suit. Will has stitched his person suit so tightly it must dig into his true skin, convinced the beast inside that he has been a person all along.

Hannibal wants him, wants to devour him and free him and know him in the same way that Will so easily knows others. He wants to be known.

“You’re better at cooking than I am,” his dear friend says, without noticing the thoughts racing through his head. Perhaps he just simply ignores it, for Hannibal’s own privacy of mind. “I’ll teach you all the best recipes I know, I’m sure you’ll do better.”

And though he doesn’t say it, he’s certain he knows that Will misses the food from his youth fiercely.

“There’s no use making them better if you already enjoy them,” he says instead of *love me, love me, love me*, and looks away so there isn’t a chance Will can see. He wants so much to consume all of his friend, all of his mind and heart and blood. He pulls out his phone instead and leaves a message for one of his on call cooks. “Though, I’ll be sure to be inspired by them, only if you cook them alongside me.”

Teasing Will comes easy now, well worn, soft. It feels warmer when he shoots Will a smile and drags his eyes along the empath’s jawline and cheekbones, when he allows himself to glance at that handsome neck.

“Feel free to explore the house while we wait. There’s a library on the ground floor.”

“You’d let me just have free reign like that?” Will asks, pushing up on his hands to stand straight. He meets Hannibal’s eyes, a rare treat, curiosity and something else he can’t pinpoint swirling in stormy blue. He asks with weight, like the answer to the question will mean something more to him than it does to Hannibal himself.

There’s a possibility, a small chance really, that Will would be able to know everything about him just by looking through his house. He knows this, but he can’t find it in himself to be concerned for the outcome when Will seems so attached to him already. He wants to tell him he has no reason to fear his friend’s beautiful mind, has no reason to worry Will would uncover something and immediately be disgusted by Hannibal.

Instead he smiles. “Of course,” he says, offering a small shrug. “We’re best friends, aren’t we?”

Will’s eyes are wide, his pupils blown, and his half smile is tugging at his lips. He looks away finally, rubbing at his neck. Slipping his glasses out of his pocket and back on his face, he nods. “Alright then.”

If Hannibal felt like being presumptuous - and he often was, but rarely when it came to the mystery of Will Graham - he would go so far as to say his friend looks flushed as he makes his escape into the wider halls of his home.

Faintly, the idea of Will looking like an excited stray who was taken to his new home strikes him. He shakes it off and sets about getting the kitchen ready instead. He'll have to beckon Will back, after all and best things be set out for the empath. If there's one place he would rather Will *not* poke through, it would be this room.

His sanctum, his art studio, of sorts. His kitchen is his only salvation from his boredom with the outside world, from the ever droning voices of *pigs*. There is salvation in the preparation of the meat, the process of cooking it *just right*, so that everyone may enjoy the delectable joys of flesh.

He knows Will does. Oh, he knows.

Hannibal has to close his eyes as he ignores his refrigerator. He doesn't need ingredients just yet. After all, learning from Will should be an exciting prospect. He sets the cutting board and sharpened knives, wonders how it would feel to carve the younger man apart, and ignores the thought.

Will is not a pig, he realizes. An equal, perhaps. Close enough to it, but not quite there yet. Like a budding rose in need of more sunshine, left alone in the dark to suffer.

He *will* make his dear Will see the sun he deserves, the pleasure in all there is to consume the flesh.

He's disrupted when the doorbell rings, perking up before heading for the front door. His head chef smiles at him as she gives him a bag with okra and other ingredients. "I made sure to grab everything you should need, Dr. Lecter. I hope you have a good dinner, sir."

Hannibal smiles at her, because she is a darling woman who knows her craft just as well as he does. It was the reason she had been hired, after all. "Thank you, Bianca. I'll send you the money for it all within the hour."

It's a good reminder to keep his human face on, to not reveal the beast underneath. After all, his dear friend isn't ready. He goes back inside and to the kitchen.

Will knew a lot of things about the human mind, *saw* a lot of things about it. A lifetime of empathy with nothing to shut it off and the pattern recognition that had plagued his father as well had led to a double edged sort of curiosity. His Pa had been as equally an odd man as Will had turned out to be and with only the two of them, there had been no one to find it odd when he'd read his way through as much literature on psychology theory as he could get his hands on as a teenager.

Despite the fact that he taught profiling and psychoanalysis, had even made a career out of it, he'd never really agreed with Freud's psychoanalytic theory. If you asked him, he'd probably say that the modern perception of psychoanalysis outside of psychiatric academic debates was less along the lines of Freud's theory and more of a homogenized mess of humanistic and psychodynamic theories.

Still, there is merit to the idea that everything about a person can tell you more than people tend to expect you to see. That's all profiling is, isn't it?

Will wanders through Hannibal's home with a curiosity that tastes burningly of hunger. It feels like less of a *home* and more of a house that the doctor simply lives in. It's large but not open, dim and quiet and still in a way that drags against his skin as he walks. Everything about it, everything in it, is perfect and classy in the way that screams how expensive everything is. Perfectly thought out and designed.

It feels, if he's entirely honest, as if the house was built to be nothing more than a stage. Something to be witnessed and witnessed in, but a performance all the same. It's as carefully modulated as Hannibal's own performance, the one he wears like a second skin that Will is slowly learning how to see past. Or maybe he's always seen it, but his eyes are finally adjusting to the dim light it's shrouded in.

There's a deep intimacy in being allowed to dig around in the illusion, find the wallpaper. He thinks that Hannibal might not even recognize it, considering the easy way he gave such a power over to Will. People generally don't like him wandering through their homes. A mind like his picks up too many things, stores them away in file cabinets and bookshelves and old chests filled with curios.

Will's chest feels full and hot with the gift unknowingly given to him.

He wanders from room to room, hall to hall; from the study and its harpsichord perfectly in tune to the guest rooms that remind him soullessly of a hotel to the closed door that he knows, without a single doubt, is Hannibal's own bedroom. He leaves that door closed, for

now. Instead, he looks through the parlor and its shelves full of books not to be read, he doesn't think, but to be observed. To be witnessed.

Hannibal, he thinks, must be lonely. A lone actor on an empty stage. Will doesn't entirely know why the thought makes his chest ache dully, a throb that sounds like hoofbeats in his head in time to his own footsteps. He can taste the realization waiting for him here, but he can't name it yet.

Instead, he returns to the kitchen when he hears the doorbell echo through the large, empty house and waits for Hannibal to return to the room. He sits at the island again and pulls off his glasses. He can't decide if his new, small discoveries have left him burning with energy or worn out from the weight of them. He thinks he might not mind either way.

"Did you have fun, Will?" Hannibal teases him without a hint of malice, because of course he does, and sets the bags in front of Will like a triumphant cat with dinner. "My cook got carried away," he warns, and he's right because the bags are nearly too-full of ingredients and okra.

It's almost like his friend doesn't notice the act he puts on even now. Less than anywhere else, because clearly Hannibal is most comfortable in his kitchen, but the veneer of domestication still hovers over the man like a comfortable cloak.

Will shrugs, because he wouldn't use the word fun. Enlightening is more apt. He moves around to peer into the bag without a proper answer, only to find delight run through him. He sorts through sun dried tomatoes and eggplant with a pleased hum.

"This will go well with the okra," he says approvingly, "Your cook did a good job. We'll want to cut off the tops and blanch it first- unless you don't mind sliminess?"

Hannibal offers a shrug back. "Whichever you prefer," he replies honestly, motioning for Will to join him at the cutting board. He looks more at ease than he ever has as he readies a pot of water in case Will needs it.

"Blanching takes too much," he decides after a moment, washing his hands and joining the man at the cutting board.

He'd learned from a babysitter how to make okra and though she'd told him about blanching them and he'd done it before, the nostalgia of roasted okra and its lingering stickiness always tasted better. Lorraine did like to say food was better when following the heart, not a cookbook. Will wonders what she would think of Hannibal's cooking.

"Cut the okra like this," he says, rinsing them clean, then chopping off the tops and slicing them in half lengthwise. "We're going to roast them with the tomatoes and eggplant. You have paprika, garlic, and lemon juice, right?"

Will knows he must, he can't help but want to poke at his friend back.

Hannibal's amused and incredulous huff is reward enough, as the man turns away to get said ingredients. "Anything else to assist you?" If Will didn't know better, and he does, he'd say

his friend is trying to bite back just as playfully.

He can't help the smile that tugs unevenly across his face, turning back to look at the okra he has piled in front of him and Hannibal. He sets to chopping up the eggplant and orders, "Cut. You know, some people like to prepare okra with mushrooms. Too earthy, in my opinion, but mushrooms have been on my mind."

Chanterelles are native to Maryland, he checked, but the mushrooms on all those graves had been carefully cultivated. They didn't spread out across the forest floor. Apparently, they tend to grow along the roots of trees naturally, but the grave sites had been clear. They'd never strayed from the fruiting blocks, though. It makes Will wonder. Why mushrooms, why in the buried bodies of people not yet dead?

"Mushrooms are prolific for sharing roots and being interconnected," Hannibal says thoughtfully. "They can be quite appealing in different dishes, easy to cultivate when you understand how."

It's almost like being led to water, but he's not sure Hannibal realizes it either, or if he's just speaking his mind as usual. His friend cuts the vegetables in practiced movements, his calloused hand holding the knife with such ease it's clear to tell the older man is a master at his craft.

"Interconnected," Will echoes, the understanding flowing through him easily. Of course. Connection. Isn't that what everyone wants? To know and see, to be known and seen? In his experience, people tend to only want to be known to a certain extent; they get uncomfortable when you see too much, see everything. To chase after such a complete connection… "He must be so lonely."

Thoughts still churning, he adds the vegetables into a metal bowl with oil and considers the head of garlic Hannibal had given him. Without much of a pause between declarations, he plucks four cloves from the clump and passes them to the doctor. "Mince these. Measurements don't matter that much in these kinds of recipes. You measure with your heart."

Hannibal takes the cloves, offering only a raised eyebrow before he sets to doing as he's told. "If he were truly lonely, he would have added himself into the mix, wouldn't he?"

"I don't think he wants to be a part of the connection," Will says consideringly, "I think he wants to understand it. Learn from it. If mushrooms truly connect, wholly, then he's… He's connecting these people. It's a gift for them as much as it is for him, I think. Where do you keep your baking sheets? I need to preheat the oven."

"Cabinet to the left of the oven," Hannibal answers, putting the minced garlic in a small bowl. "There must be a determining factor for the people he chooses, then. Surely something that would make it easy with his occupation to pick optimal targets."

"There wasn't a chemical restraint in the IV lines." Will knows enough about forensics to get by, but he's not a forensicist for a reason. To his detriment, he's always been more inclined to

the mind. “Beverly said it was just sugar water. But they were still comatose, and he really encouraged decomposition.”

Will pulls out a pan, lining it with parchment paper before returning to peer into the bowl of okra, eggplant, and tomatoes. He hums, before reaching for Hannibal’s overly fancy spice rack- though he guesses it’s probably perfectly sufficient in the older man’s mind. He adds the cayenne, paprika, and turmeric by heavy pinches, pausing to eye the amount in the bowl each time. He nicks the garlic from Hannibal and adds it with lemon juice to the bowl, mixing it all together with a hand. He probably *should* use a spatula, but he’s never bothered before and he’s not starting now. Not even for Hannibal.

“Measure with the heart,” Will repeats, picking up one of the okra slices and biting it in half. Unsure, he holds the other half out to his friend, “Try this. Do you think it needs fennel?”

Hannibal, who had been standing to the side with a loose fist on his chin, deep in thought, doesn’t even blink when he leans over to take a bite. He leans back only barely, but looks pleasantly surprised. “I think it would add a nice touch, yes,” he answers after swallowing, and then, “It could be diabetes. It’s the only explanation for the coma without drugs being involved, isn’t it?”

Will’s eyes catch on the shape of his throat, his mouth, and wonders nonsensically if the preheating oven is the source for the warmth spreading through his limbs. He tears his eyes away forcibly, adding the fennel with his clean hand. He dumps the mix of vegetables onto the pan and spreads them out, passing it to Hannibal to put in the oven while he washes his hands again.

“We’ll check on it in ten minutes,” he says, trying and failing to shove the warmth suffused through him away. “And I’ll pass that on to Bev in the morning. You really don’t mind me staying here tonight?”

“Why would I mind?” Hannibal asks curiously, closing the oven and washing his hands as well. “Or, rather, why do you seem so nervous?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I tend to make people uncomfortable. They don’t enjoy having someone like me in such intimate spaces, usually,” Will says dryly. In an absent way, he wonders if Hannibal is comfortable here, if he considers it an intimate space. He finds he wants to see him at his most comfortable. Unrestrained. It’s a novel feeling, to want to see more than he already does, and one he’s not sure he’s entirely comfortable with. He saw all the guest rooms so the conclusion should be foregone, but he can’t help asking, “Where will I stay?”

Hannibal dries his hands and gently grabs one of Will’s arms by the elbow with just enough pressure it feels right without being restrictive. “If I were uncomfortable by your presence, Will, I don’t think I would have stayed friends with you. Do you?” He’s staring at him, watching for something, but the empath isn’t sure what. “You can have my bed, if you’d like. I don’t mind sleeping elsewhere.”

“Absolutely not,” he says before he thinks it through, nearly cutting his friend off. He feels soothed by the man’s words but- “Hannibal, we’re both too old to sleep on a couch without

messing up our backs. I don't mind sharing."

Oddly enough, it's true. Though he's not sure how much the doctor will mind when Will sweats through his sheets from a nightmare or odd dream.

Hannibal doesn't let go, but he does relent with a soft sigh. "If you insist." It sounds less exasperated and more fond than he probably means to, and his friend rubs a slow circle into Will's elbow, over his clothes. "Hopefully it helps."

He thinks it just might.

Chapter End Notes

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter! We'll see you next time!

angel of small death & the codeine scene

Chapter Summary

> with her sweetened breath, and her tongue so mean
> she's the angel of small death and the codeine scene

Chapter Notes

> I see you moteitbe. I see you. **-Salty**
>
> This chapter is in honor of Java, my cat who passed away two days ago. It's a big chapter but it's a good one in my opinion. A shout out to moteitbe, your reactions to this fic always brighten my day. <3 **-Bones**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TattleCrime Exclusive!

It Takes One To Know One

[***Image Description:*** *Two men stand in the woods over the graves of the Mushroom Man's victims behind the yellow police tape. One is taller and older, with graying blond hair, a three piece suit, and a hand on the shoulder of the other man. The second man is slightly shorter, with unkempt dark hair, glasses, and an unshaven face. He is visibly being soothed by the blond man.*]

[***Image Description****: A close up of the dark haired man, scowling directly at the camera.*]

Article:

The FBI isn't just hunting psychopaths, they're head-hunting them, too, offering competitive pay and benefits in the hopes of using one demented mind to catch another. Sure, we're familiar with the stereotype of the FBI profiler, swaggering onto a crime scene, fitting the pieces together like a master puzzler with his 1000-piece jigsaw. In reality, these profilers should be likened to harridans reading a cup of spent tea leaves - passing off their active imagination as incisive fact.

One of these so-called 'profilers' is Will Graham, pictured above. A former cop and current teacher for the FBI is not all that this part time consultant is, however. According to inside sources, Graham also has the peculiar ability to reimagine crimes and think like these

psychopaths and serial killers- something surely only another psychopath could do. He's even accompanied by renowned psychiatrist and socialite Doctor Hannibal Lecter, who seems to be his acting handler.

Graham and Lecter are also known to be consulting on the case of the Minnesota Shrike, a cannibal who has kidnapped and killed eight girls, only one of whom's body has been found so far. As reported by anonymous sources, Graham was the one who found and took down the Shrike in his home, shooting Garret Jacob Hobbs nine times. Seems a bit excessive, if you ask this reporter. Now the unstable man and his handler are part of the leading team in finding the rest of Hobbs' victims.

But is it really safe for this investigation to be in the hands of a psychopath like Will Graham?

Hannibal closes the page and then his laptop, a bit miffed. He'd never admit it aloud, because it would point too many eyes his way, but Hannibal is a fan of Freddie Lounds and her unscrupulous ideals. He wouldn't trust her as far as he could throw her, no, but he enjoyed her articles.

Enjoyed being mentioned in them, of course. Simply… not like *this*. Will's handler? The insult makes him reconsider his stance on keeping the woman alive. But then, saving her for his dear Will, when he's ready, would be a wonderful sight.

Thinking of the empath, Hannibal slept comfortably the previous night, hadn't been awoken by the younger man or his nightmares at all. It makes him wonder if he'll see a well-rested Will for the first time in weeks. He sets about preparing breakfast, though his thoughts are still on that article. Will, of all people, to be suspected of being a psychopath? How she could miss the humanity in the younger man, the empathy that he has no control over, made him wonder if she even *is* a good reporter.

He perks up slightly at the sound of footsteps, but doesn't turn away from the oven top. "Good morning, Will. Did you sleep well?"

"I did, actually," comes his voice from the kitchen doorway. He lingers there for a moment before the soft padding of bare feet lets him know that Will has taken his place at the island where he'd sat the night before. "Better than I have in a while, actually. What are you making?"

"Nothing complicated," Hannibal half-lies. Will just doesn't have to know the bacon he'll be eating is of the long pork variety. "Feel free to stay here as often as you'd like, Will. I might have to change the decor before you can bring your pack, however."

Will makes an odd noise that sounds as if he couldn't decide whether to swallow his own tongue or choke on air. "You don't have to do that. I don't- I wouldn't want to be a bother," his friend denies. Hannibal doesn't even have to turn to know he's shaking his head. He can be so wonderfully self-deprecating sometimes that it's as if he's already doing half of the work to pull him in closer to the older man.

"You wouldn't be," he finds himself answering too honestly. Though, if he wanted to be even more honest, he'd ask Will to properly move in with the dogs and all. He sighs softly, setting the bacon aside to start simple omelets, because Will loves simple foods and Hannibal can't help but indulge him.

The beast under his skin is insistent that trapping Will here would make everything perfect, even if Hannibal disagrees with his own impulsive thoughts of devouring the younger man. "I'm sure you can already imagine I don't invite many guests to stay. For you, Will, it's an easy choice to make."

“Oh.” The soft, stunned sound is impossible not to turn towards. Will looks radiant like this: hair still mussed from sleep, in nothing but a rumpled old shirt and a pair of borrowed lounge pants, all his edges rounded and gentled in the morning light. The shadows that have been haunting his face since the crime scene and his hallucination of the man who may as well be his very first victim are gone, vanished into the night.

Hannibal has seen Will half asleep, angry, panicked, and even comfortable in his own body as he moves around a crime scene. But he has never looked as beautiful as he does standing in *his* kitchen with wide eyes.

He licks his lips like he’ll find the words he wants to say stained there, and when Will speaks, there’s a warmth suffused in his voice, “Thank you, Hannibal.”

He thinks Will might just be the death of him, with how easily that warmth makes him want to give the man anything he could ever ask for. He offers him a smile and plates the professor’s breakfast before setting it down in front of him. "Eat. I'll drive you to the academy later."

There's more he wants to say, to do, but he refrains from everything except setting a hand on the empath's shoulder as he goes back to cooking.

He just barely catches the wrinkle in Will’s face as he turns away. “Right. I need to text Bev, let her know about the diabetes,” he groans, followed by the sounds of silverware clinking against the plate as he digs into the meal. “This is delicious, thank you. Probably going to be the best thing I eat today. I think I’m going to visit Abigail after work.”

He's certain he could invite himself along with little to no denial from Will, and it's tempting. Instead, he turns with a second plate for himself and sits next to his friend. "Would you like for me to drop you off there, as well? I can leave books for you to read to her, if you'd like."

His dear Will needs time to himself, after all. Even if Hannibal finds it outrageous and would rather keep the handsome man at his beck and call.

Will smiles at him, uneven and unbearably docile in the morning wake. That alone makes it worth it. To memorize this smile and a thousand others would be a gift worth bearing the departure. He reminds Hannibal of the coyotes that colonized much of North America: a solitary creature, yet flitting easily between species far less powerful. Coyotes, he knows, are among the ranks of truly monogamous creatures and it makes his heart yearn, *hope*.

There is a keen thrill in the idea of hunting with Will.

“I’d like that,” his dear friend says, too busy looking down at his bacon as he devours it to notice his wandering mind, “I don’t think I have the right kind of books to read to her. Unless Abigail wants to hear about freshwater fish or the entomology of the Americas, I do have a few books on that.”

Hannibal snorts fondly, putting a piece of bacon from his plate into Will's without a second thought. To hunt together, his dear friend will need to have a taste for it, and he is more than happy to indulge him. Abigail, who looks so much like Will despite not being his by blood, was raised as a lure. Maybe hearing about fish will help.

"It could never hurt," he says softly, turning to his own breakfast. It hits him suddenly how *easy* it is to feed Will, provide for him. He never saw himself as a creature in need of such comforts, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe he should talk to Bedelia about it.

The smile on his face only grows, a lovely sight. Will takes a moment before he admits, “It’s the only thing my Pa and I ever really bonded over, fishing. There wasn’t much in common between us. I don’t think he ever really knew what to do with me unless we were fishing.”

Again with the little pearls of Will's life, he finds himself greedily wanting more. He takes a bite of his breakfast and debates what to share for the younger man to not feel so *psychoanalyzed* by his silence.

Finally, he lands on, "I was born in Lithuania." He's not sure he should elaborate, or say much more than that. Nothing good ever came out of it, certainly not himself. "I prefer spending my time here."

“Is that where your accent is from?” Will asks, surprising him. It’s not the question he was expecting. “I wouldn’t have guessed it was Baltic, but I guess I don’t know much about European accents.”

He can't help the warmth that spreads through him as Hannibal shakes his head. He doesn't think he's ever truly laughed in… years, really. It's a bit of a rejuvenating feeling that his friend provides and he can't help but be grateful. "Yes, well, most Americans see European accents as a generalized sound," he decides to tease.

Will wrinkles his nose, face scrunching up in a way that is far more charming than it ought to be. Taking an aggressive bite out of his bacon, he complains, “Most Americans can’t be trusted to have any opinion on accents, even American ones. Trust me, it’s stupid to have to learn a new one just to be taken seriously. At least people seem to think European accents sound smarter.”

By now Hannibal knows full well about Will's past, or at least what is convenient to know. He still asks, still wants to receive it from the empath's own mouth. "You have an accent, then?"

“I’m from Louisiana, of course I do. I’m from *New Orleans*. The kind of accent you get growing up there gets you labeled as stupid outside of the area,” Will shakes his head. He

takes the moment to finish his breakfast but Hannibal is a patient creature. It’s worth it when he admits, “It still slips out sometimes, when I’m too tired or drunk. It’s embarrassing.”

He wonders if he could make Will slip up just by coaxing it out. If he would be able to taste it on his tongue, bite it out of the younger man until it's all he can sound like. He resists the urge to rub his thumb on the corner of his friend's lips and turns to finish his breakfast. "There is nothing wrong with being yourself, Will. But I understand comfort can be more important."

He doesn’t appreciate the way every line of Will’s face turns down. He finds himself unable to savor the vulnerability painted there, because the discomfort with himself the younger man holds is too plain to see. With a self deprecating laugh, Will says dryly, “There’s everything wrong with being myself, Hannibal. No one ever likes what they see.”

He stands and gathers their dishes, resting his hand on the back of Will's neck gently before squeezing, just enough. The pulse he feels there almost makes him lean down to bite, to taste. He resists the beast under the mirage of humanity and rubs his thumb up and down just once. "Only fools cannot appreciate what makes us all different, unique."

He slips his hand away, the heat there thrumming throughout his body, radiating in what should be painful awareness. Instead, it feels like a dull ache being eased, soothed into a mere passing thought. He wants to touch Will more often, everywhere; wants to wrap his hands around delicate wrists and a supple neck. Instead, he focuses on letting Will dwell on his words as he washes their plates.

Hannibal’s home, or maybe just the man himself, had felt like such a warm escape that emerging back into the world leaves Will’s skin feeling raw. It’s a bit disconcerting how easily his friend puts him at ease, but he can’t deny he slept better than he has in weeks. He feels better rested, a little less like he’s standing on an eroding bluff, when he drives from Baltimore to Quantico and the feeling manages to buoy him through his first two lectures of the day. Even as he sits down to work through lunch, he can’t help but think about that morning.

There’s nothing wrong with being yourself, Hannibal had told him and when he had looked at the man, Will knew he meant it. He knows, without a doubt, that Hannibal believes it. That Hannibal believes there would be nothing wrong if Will stopped building paper walls to look as normal as possible. He thinks that the older man might even be telling the truth- that if Will shed every skin he’s clung to, Hannibal would be the first person to not find the Will underneath it all lacking. Ugly and unbalanced and disturbing.

He wonders what the man would say if he peeled everything away until Will Graham, FBI consultant, became nothing more than *just Will*. He wonders if Hannibal would look at him - awkward and mean and prone to starting fights, with a thick accent and too intrusive eyes - and still enjoy being around it.

He hopes so.

(If he’s honest, and he rarely ever fully is, he hopes that Hannibal would like that more. Would like *him* more, if he gave in to whatever he was under the layers of personhood, darkness and all. Will has always been lonely, but he’s never felt it so strongly until he met Hannibal and realized how nice it could be to not be alone.)

He thinks about it as he grades essay after essay. It lingers on his mind when he realizes that he’s hungry but didn’t have a chance to bring anything for lunch. He’s thinking about it when high heels clicking down the hallway turn into his classroom, and he looks up to let out a surprised, “Oh, uh. Hi, Alana.”

"Hi, Will," she replies, walking all the way up to his desk with what can only be described as stiff awkwardness now that the students aren't here. "How are you?"

“Uh, pretty alright?” Will answers, confusion catching him out. He looks up at her and the intent look on her face and decides immediately that something is wrong. He pushes his chair back to stand, puts the armor that had fallen away while he mused back on. “I slept pretty well last- is something wrong?”

"Um, I didn't want you to be ambushed," she replies with a slight wince, trying to look him in the eyes. Like she could understand whatever might be there.

“Is this an ambush?” It’s certainly starting to feel like one, the pleasant feeling in his chest that had buoyed him through the day suddenly evaporating. Will sets a hand on his stack of papers, ready to tell her that he really does need to finish grading before his lunch hour is over.

"Ambush is later. Immediately later soon to now," she says quickly, shaking her head. As footsteps cross the threshold of his classroom, Alana Bloom tries to hide their new guest by moving in the middle of Will's view. "When Jack arrives, consider yourself ambushed."

If Will believed in a God, he’d have to wonder if this was his punishment for having a good morning for the first time since Jack dragged him into consulting on the Minnesota Shrike case. But he doesn’t, so he has to come to the unfortunate conclusion that his not quite boss is just unable to comprehend the concept of giving him one fucking break.

“Here’s Jack,” he grumbles under his breath.

“Will, let’s talk,” Jack says. He wonders if he could kick the man out of his classroom. Maybe if he wishes hard enough, one of his students will walk in needing help and he can usher both Jack and Alana out. “You left the scene pretty quickly yesterday.”

Will winces, “I didn’t think you needed me anymore. I gave you my impressions, and everyone was pretty preoccupied with the, uh, last victim.”

“Whether you’re needed or not anymore is for me to decide.” God, he doesn’t get paid enough for this.

"*Jack*," Alana almost warns, looking more exasperated about being in the middle than his actual words. It's almost like she wants him to get to the point and explain why they're *both*

here. He'd like an explanation, too.

“You’re still in the field and I’d like you to stay that way,” Jack says, redirecting, and Will’s body goes cold. He suddenly knows where this is going. “I’m recommending you for a psych evaluation, Will. You don’t get to say no this time.”

He wishes he was anywhere but here, the sudden and intense weight of the discomfort that crowds against his skin making him itch. The first time Will had been dragged into a psych eval, he’d been 16. His high school psychiatrist had been alerted by the school counselor and several of his teachers who had been *concerned* about him.

He’d been stuck in that small, cramped room with a gray haired woman for almost two hours as she tried to wriggle admissions from him. As if he would just say *yes, in fact, I* do *sometimes think about breaking a window with my head because everyone around me is thinking and feeling too loud for me to handle right now*. After less than twenty minutes and three separate attempts to ask him if anything was going on at home or why his teachers reported him spacing out in class, Will had resorted to staring over her shoulder blankly and imagining the river where his father had taught him to fish.

He’d been stuck until his Pa had stormed into the room to drag him home and cuss out just about every administrator in the school. They’d moved about a week later.

Now, standing in his own classroom, Will has to grip the edge of his desk to keep his hands from shaking. “Are we starting now?” he bites out, looking at Alana with new eyes, “Because unfortunately, I’m still saying no. I told you Jack, you’re not putting me in therapy. You know I’m not comfortable with anyone in my head. Is that all?”

"The question is, do you want to go back to the field?" Alana asks him with all the formality she really shouldn't have the right to. She barrels on before he can even snap at her, "You’ve never killed anyone before, Will. It’s a deadly force encounter. It’s a lot to digest. I would love to help you, that's why Jack and I are here."

Will knows it’s a lot to handle. He’s the one shot Garret Jacob Hobbs nine times and relives it in his dreams. The funny thing is that his nightmares have less to do with killing Hobbs and more to do with the fact that it took him so many tries to do it. That Abigail is lying in a coma in a hospital, orphaned by his own hand, because he couldn’t move fast enough to save her mother. To save her.

“I used to work Homicide,” he points out. He’s been on the scene of deadly force encounters before. There’s a scar on his collar bone and two metal plates in his left shoulder blade to prove it.

“The reason you currently used to work Homicide is because you didn’t have the stomach for pulling the trigger. You just pulled the trigger nine times!” Jack yells and Will doesn’t flinch but there is a numbness spreading up from his fingers and toes. No, what he didn’t have the stomach for wasn’t pulling the trigger, it was that he was too afraid of how much he knew he’d *like* it.

There is something wrong with Will Graham. There is something wrong with him and it is all people ever seem to see.

He feels kind of sick, trapped in his own fucking classroom and told he's- what, unstable? Too fragile? A goddamn mess? It's not the first time he's been told that and he *knows* it won't be the last. But usually, it's not coming on the heels of hallucinating the man he killed only a couple weeks ago. Will wants to disappear into his own head, go back to this morning when Hannibal had held him together by the neck and told him, *there's nothing wrong being yourself*.

But he can't. He knows himself, and he knows that he's going to open his mouth to say no again, but the weight of Jack and Alana's expectations and wants are so heavy on his skin, his hair, his mouth. He knows he's going to relent and say yes instead, and spend the rest of the day contemplating ripping his own traitorous tongue out.

"Wait, so a psych eval isn't-" he starts, and relief sweeps through him when he never gets to finish the question.

"Excuse me," Hannibal's familiar voice bites out from the classroom door. He looks ostentatious, nearly *enraged*. He takes his time walking towards them, knows it attracts the most attention and seems to prefer it be directed at *him* than Will. He comes to a standstill between Will and his desk and Alana and Jack. "Why are you both here and, more importantly, *agent Crawford*, why does Will look so distressed."

Does he? Will blinks, he thought he was pretty good at just shutting down and going blank. He has plenty of practice at it. He swallows and says, "Jack here is demanding I have a psych evaluation before returning to the field after what happened with the Shrike."

It comes out flatter than he means it to, but honestly, he can't be bothered with moderating how much emotion he pours into his voice so it doesn't sound dead right about now. Alana had asked if he even wanted to be in the field and he doesn't even know if he has an answer. No, he doesn't want more killers crowding into his head and whispering all their darkest secrets. Yes, he wants to catch them, wants to know that he's saving lives. There's no right answer, not one that he thinks she'd accept.

Not that he wants Alana in his head. He likes her. She's pretty and kind and generally he doesn't mind talking to her. He can ignore the way her voice dips like she's talking to a young patient sometimes, because she ignores when he snaps at her like an asshole. Even when the subtle condensation grates against him. He likes her, he thinks they're even friends.

And it's that fact that makes him want her digging through his head even less than he would a stranger. Because he's seen her curiosity, her interest. He's felt the way she looks at him sometimes, like maybe she could fix him. Usually, she has the good sense to disregard and bury that. Will doesn't think they could stay friends if she was trying to get into his mind. If she was his *psychiatrist*, of all things.

Hannibal clicks his tongue harshly at Will's words, barely giving Alana and Jack any time to protest. "Alana, I believed you had learned better under my tutelage than to corner people into agreeing to medical evaluations, *no matter* the field."

He doesn't think he's ever seen Hannibal so angry. Derisive, objective, maybe a little condescending at times, when he would be annoyed by people's rudeness, but never like *this*.

"And Jack, if Will refuses your new terms as they keep changing, then there's nothing you can do. *Coercing* someone into therapy is not something you have the power to do. It is a *choice*," he snaps, turning to Will and grabbing his arm- with delicately gentle hands, despite the clearly insulted look on his face -to pull him outside the classroom and away from it. "Have a good *day*."

Oh no, Will thinks distantly, staring blankly at Hannibal as he lets his friend pull him from his classroom and ungraded papers, *oh fuck. Why was that hot?*

The halls of the Academy are mostly empty and Will lets Hannibal guide them, the weight and warmth of his hand grounding. He breathes as he filters Alana's pity and want and guilt and Jack's aggressive surety out of his head. Sometimes he wishes he could scrub the walls of his brain clean until there was no one left inside but him.

"You didn't have to do that," Will finds himself saying, but his voice is tougher than he thinks it should be and it strikes him that he's leaning into the guidance of Hannibal's hand on his arm. He can't decide if he likes it so much he never wants the man to let go or if he desperately needs to be alone, untouched by even his dogs. "I could have- I was going to-"

"Agree?" Hannibal asks, voice gentle and warm just like his hand instead of the detached cold it had been before. "Will, I don't have to explain why forcing someone into therapy is a terrible idea to you. You were an officer before this, explain to me what happens if someone is found to have been coerced into confessing a crime."

His friend slides his hand down Will's arm and to his hand, leading him back out into the world instead of the suffocating halls of the Academy. The older man is looking at him, but there is no pity to be found, only concern in his brown eyes.

"The case would get thrown out," Will says, swallowing. He looks into Hannibal's eyes and debates letting himself drown in them, in the heavy, warm blanket of worry without expectation or accusation. He thinks, *I want to kiss him*. He has to tear his eyes away before the thought spills into his staring.

He looks down at his feet as they enter into open air, cold in the early winter. Embarrassment rushes through him and he licks his lips, trying to find the words. "Maybe- maybe they're right, Hannibal. I *saw* Hobbs yesterday in that grave. I don't *like* it, but it's not like it would be the first time someone was making sure I'm not- *unstable* or something."

He can't help spitting the word out; he hates it. He'd rather someone call him insane to his face than fucking *unstable*.

"Will," Hannibal stops him shortly and gently helps him into the passenger side of his bentley. From there, he rests his hand on the back of Will's neck, squeezes again. "I can assure you, *you are not unstable*. There are many things to take into account before throwing you to the wolves that would rather dissect your brain than truly help you. If you wish for

medical counsel, I have many friends who are doctors that owe me favors. Whatever you would like that isn't therapy, I can assist you with. I promise."

Will breathes. He breathes until the heat of the hand on his neck seems to pulse in time to his heartbeat, until he feels less like he's standing on shaky ground. "Thank you," he says instead of *if I kissed you right now, would you still be mad at them, and can I watch you yell*? "I do feel better after sleeping better last night. Maybe I really am just too tired."

It's easier to remind himself that stress can do weird things, *has* done weird things, to him before now that he's away from Alana and Jack. He finds he still hungers for fieldwork, for saving people. But it's easier to breathe once he remembers that this isn't his brain completely betraying him.

Hannibal rubs his thumb under Will's ear in almost time with his heartbeat, silent in contemplation. "Then you can stay with me again," he decides with the same tone as when he orders someone to do something without their knowledge. He finally pulls back, hand slipping away before the door closes.

It's not long before Hannibal takes his place at the driver's seat. "We will pick up Clover and Winston and go back to my house, Will. I would rather you stay with me than keep worrying about what those two have said."

It's incredible that the Hannibal he knows, gentle and easy and *kind,* is the same man who so coldly knocked Jack and Alana down a peg. For him, just for Will. When he thinks about it, even the gentlest of animals have the capacity to bite.

It's dangerous, he realizes distantly, how much sway Hannibal has over him. He just can't bring himself to care that much about it. And well, he really does like the idea of Winston laying across his legs on Hannibal's ridiculously fancy couch.

"Okay," he says. He means, *ask me anything right now and I'd give it to you*. "That- that sounds nice. I could- there's some trout in the meat freezer, if you want. I know you like cooking, but you make me food so much I feel like I should provide something for the meals, too."

Hannibal sighs softly, starting the car. "That would be very appreciated, Will," he assures softly, pulling out of the parking lot and towards the younger man's home with ease, which is more comforting than it probably should be.

The drive is comfortably quiet and the dogs are thrilled to see them, when they arrive at his house. They feed them and Will texts his neighbor a mile down the road asking if she would stop by and let them out and feed them later in the evening. Then he and Hannibal get Winston and Clover situated in the back of his car and head for Baltimore.

Despite knowing about his guest rooms, he sleeps in Hannibal's bed again. He wakes up only once, jerking awake and breathing hard from a nightmare he can't remember. But Hannibal sleeps next to him, breathing evenly, and he can see Winston sleeping on the floor next to the bed. It was something he hadn't expected his proper friend to agree to, much less suggest himself, but Will was grateful nonetheless.

The peace breaks in the morning, of course. Jack must have decided to forgo the whole psych eval thing, because his name is flashing on the display of Will's phone. He frowns at the ringing device, glancing up to Hannibal to grumble, "It's Jack."

Hannibal darkens momentarily before asking, "Would you prefer I answer?"

"Would you?" Will asks before he can think it through. The call declines during his hesitation but immediately starts up again and he honestly wants to see what Hannibal will do. He accepts the call, putting the phone on speaker and pushing it across the counter to sit next to Hannibal.

"Will," Jack starts, stern and disapproving as always. "Why didn't you pick up the first time? We need you in, now."

"Hello, Jack," Hannibal replies pleasantly. Or, as pleasantly as the man is willing to be, at least. He puts his hand on the back of Will's neck again, rubs his thumb in a soothing pattern. "Did you not say he needed a psychiatric evaluation before returning to the field? As far as I am aware, you seem to be misremembering your own demands."

"Dr. Lecter? Why do you have Will's phone? Where's Will?"

He sighs heavily and pretends he isn't leaning more of his weight into Hannibal's steady hand. He might be a little obsessed with the former doctor's hands, broad and strong and always so steady that Will can't help but be envious.

"I'm right here, Jack. What happened to needing an eval?" he asks.

After a long, tense moment Will can't help but enjoy, the unit chief finally answers, "The review board officially cleared you. There's no need for an evaluation."

Hannibal stills for a moment, staring intently at the phone. "And you and Dr. Bloom will be leaving Will alone regarding such matters?"

After another tense moment, Jack finally replies with a terse, "*Yes*."

Will lets out a relieved breath before he remembers what Jack had said just a moment ago. "Why do you need me to come in right now? It's-" he glances at his watch, frowning, "Jesus, it's not even 9 am."

"We have solid reason to believe we've located our mushroom killer, thanks to your diabetes tip. We almost got him last night, but he escaped. Will, there was that Tattle Crime article on his computer- we think he's looking for you."

His heart freezes in his chest and he stops breathing. It's only Winston's wet nose nudging into his hand that calls him back into the world, because the dog was supposed to stay out of the kitchen while Hannibal cooks. Taking a shuddering breath, Will drops to his knees and hugs his most recent stray. Winston, because he's the best boy in the world, bears it without complaint and only licks his shoulder soothingly.

"We'll be in touch," Hannibal says faintly, hanging up the call before resting a hand on Will's shoulder. "If he is desperate, and he will be, we should go check on Abigail right away, Will."

He thinks if anything has happened to her, Will might be killing another man today. The thought alone makes him sick- not because he had it or can't stomach the thought of killing another man, but because how much he *wants* to have a reason for killing the man is surprising. It's never a nice surprise to realize how willing to kill in cold blood you are.

"Yes, okay," he says, nodding and stumbling up to his feet while Winston whines in concern. "We should do that. I need- she has to be okay, right? Hospitals have plenty of security."

"I'm willing to imagine he would be at ease with other medical staff, if the diabetes was how they found him," Hannibal admits honestly, because he has always been honest with Will. He rubs Will's shoulder, gently coaxing him up off the ground. "I can make calls, but it would be best to go now."

"Fuck," Will swears. He turns away from Hannibal once he's standing, pulling on his shoes, gun belt, and jacket. He gives Winston and Clover both kisses on their soft heads, instructing, "Don't go on the couch and be good until we get back, okay?"

Vibrating with tension, he turns back to the other man. "Okay. This is- let's go make sure Abigail is okay."

Hannibal hands him the keys to his Bentley and pulls out his phone to make calls, keeping quiet enough to be background noise as they get in.

The drive to the hospital is quiet beyond the soft murmur of Hannibal's voice and there is a small part of him awed at the man letting him drive his car. But Will's mind is mostly empty of any proper thought, just a cold dread seeping through his limbs and something burning in his stomach that might be fear, or might be anger. They taste the same to him. He parks the nice car in the first open spot he sees once they reach John Hopkins and climbs out with a sense of purpose he hasn't felt in so long that it feels foreign.

His hands do not shake when he climbs from the car, nor does his voice when he tells Hannibal to check Abigail's room while he checks with the nurses. For all that he'd been unable, or unwilling, to shoot, he'd been a good cop. Will had been good at his job as a homicide detective, and the same steady sense of justice fills him even when the nurse tells him she doesn't know who took Abigail Hobbs for tests, or where.

The only thing he feels when he finds their killer trying to cart Abigail's bed towards a back exit he's pretty sure is used to get corpses to the funeral home is pure, white hot *anger*. Before recently, he'd never killed anyone- never even *shot* anyone. But Will's hands *do not shake* when he lifts his gun and shoots Eldon Stammets.

He does not feel bad for it.

"What were you gonna do to her?" he asks, closing in and kicking Stammets' gun away from him. He keeps his gun aimed level with the killer's head and a small, wrathful part of him hopes that the man tries anything at all.

"We all evolved from mycelium," the injured man shudders out. "I'm simply reintroducing her to the concept."

"By burying her alive?" Will spits. He remembers looking into that grave and seeing Abigail's father, but right now, staring back down the barrel of his gun, the only thing he sees is Stammets. He probably shouldn't feel relieved by that, but he is. He also feels pretty damn pissed right now and doesn't even try to stop himself from needling the serial killer on the floor in front of him, "Humans didn't evolve from mycelium, Stammets, we just happened to all evolve from LUCA."

"The journalist said you understood me!" He cries out, looking feverish and unhinged in his rage. Miserable, even.

"I don't."

It's half a lie. He does understand Eldon Stammets, in a way. He understands his thought processes and his motivations and his wants and how achingly *lonely* he is. He feels the hurt and the want and the flaws in logic like his own skin, torn and flayed open. But Will has never *wanted* to connect, not like this. He's spent his whole life running and hiding and burying himself away from prying eyes because he connects too much, sees too much, *feels too much*.

To yearn for that sort of painful connection so much as to bury other people until they become less than people, nothing more than fertilizer that once felt… That, he will never be able to understand.

"Well, you would have. You would have. If you walk through a field of mycelium, they know you are there. They know you are there," Stammets starts rambling as Hannibal hurries over behind Will. He stays silent as he brushes past him, a hand on his shoulder, and goes straight to Abigail. "The spores reach for you as you walk by. I know who you're reaching for. I know. Abigail Hobbs. And you should have let me plant her. You would have found her in a field, where she was finally able to reach back!"

"No, we wouldn't. She'll be far more capable of reaching back herself once she wakes," Hannibal snaps, like a dog bearing its teeth all over again. His friend's shoulders form a line of tension, like he is pulled taut and stopping himself from killing Stammets with his bare hand. "I've contacted Jack, I'll take Abigail back to her room, Will."

"No," Will says before he can think better of it, wincing. It's just that he doesn't want to let either Hannibal or Abigail out of his sight right now. Doesn't think he can trust himself alone with Stammets. "Sorry, I just- Stay? Please?"

Hannibal pauses, looking down at Stammets with an unreadable expression before concentrating on Abigail once more. "Yes, I'll stay."

It feels like it takes an hour for Jack to find them in the hall, followed by a parade of cops and nurses, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. Will only feels like he is able to breathe again when he lowers his gun, arms heavy as he resets the safety and stows it away.

The rush and clamor of the hallway, the crime scene, is overstimulating as the adrenaline high crashes, but he's honestly more focused on Abigail.

He reaches a hand out towards, not sure if he means to hold her hand or just brush the hair from her face. He never figures it out as the nurses rush past again, carefully leading her hospital bed back towards the elevators. He watches her go, then Stammets in a pair of handcuffs despite the shoulder Will shot definitely being broken.

(A part of him, bigger than he'd like, wishes he'd shot the man in the chest instead. He isn't sure if he wants the man dead for nearly killing Abigail like that, or if he would be content enough with just a collapsed lung.)

Hannibal turns to him and gently grabs both of his shoulders, digging his thumbs delicately enough to catch his attention into the flesh where shoulder meets collarbone but not enough to hurt. "Will? Look at me, Will."

It's grounding, *Hannibal* is grounding. Something about the man always makes Will feel unbearably present. He takes a deep breath, gaze flitting across his face before focusing on the line of his jaw instead. As steady as his friend is, he doesn't know if he can handle feeling anyone else's emotions right now- and certainly not Hannibal, who must be as angry as he is about the risk Abigail was in.

The risk Freddie Lounds put her in, he thinks bitterly.

"What are you thinking?" His friend asks and, despite the anger they must share over this, Hannibal's voice is unbearably kind and soothing.

"I'm thinking," Will manages, hating how the words come out like pulling teeth with how mad (scared, a voice echoes) he is, "that Eldon Stammets deserves- worse. I know I shouldn't, but I just- I kind of wish I shot him in the stomach instead."

Hannibal glances back to where Jack stands, looking at his team, and ushers Will out of the hospital. Once they're outside, one hand still firm on the younger man's shoulder, he says, "I wish you had as well," only to wince slightly. "Would you like to drive back? They won't allow visitors to her room for a few days."

No. Will wants to go back and demand his way into Abigail's room and sit next to her to tell her how sorry he is. He wants to find Eldon Stammets and punch him in the face. He wants to hunt down Freddie Lounds and make her realize just what she did. But he can't do any of that, can't pitch a fit like a child, and he's surprised to find he's still not shaking.

So instead of all of that, he says, "Yes. You'd let me drive your car again?"

"Is there a reason I shouldn't?" Hannibal asks, slipping his hand to the back of Will's neck for just a moment before walking ahead. "Unless you've lost your driver's license between getting us here and now, I trust you with my car, Will."

It sounds too much like Hannibal means he'd trust him with his *life*.

Oh no, Will thinks and then doesn't think much else. There's not much else to think about, except the warmth curling in the pit of his stomach and the urge to ask Hannibal to put his hand back on his neck. He swallows, firmly turning his eyes to the black car as they approach, and forces himself to say, "Thank you."

He drives them back to Hannibal's house and he finds that all his words have left him. He's just too stunned, his head too full of the way his friend had said he trusted him and the exact tone of voice used, to find anything to say. Even pulling into the driveway, he finds himself sitting there for a long moment, reveling and revolting in face of the fact he might have a horrible crush on his best friend.

Fuck.

Hannibal touches his arm, burningly warm now even with the layers separating their skins. "Do you need a moment alone?"

"No," Will says automatically, before pausing to think about it. He shakes his head, removing the keys and handing them back to the older man. "No, I don't think I want to be alone with my thoughts right now. I keep thinking about- we should check on the dogs."

I keep thinking about what it would have been like to kill Stammets, like I killed Hobbs, he refuses to admit. If he says it out loud, it becomes real, and he doesn't want that to be real yet. Everyone thinks about killing someone at some point or another, he knows. But most people aren't thinking about it while holding a gun and staring that person down. Most people aren't wondering if it would feel as good as they think it will.

Hannibal hums, eyes boring into the side of his face with an intensity he typically keeps measured. "Alright, Will." He exits the car first, but makes his way around to open the door for him, like a gentleman. "Let's get inside."

Briefly, Will wishes Hannibal was a horrible person. He wishes they weren't friends, that he had the capacity to hate him. Wishes that the warmth of the hand helping him out of the car didn't set him alight.

Generally, he doesn't even like people much, not to mention liking people romantically. He knows he's misanthropic, asocial bordering into antisocial, but he's never minded. He doesn't even mind it right now. But for a moment, he wishes he was more so, that he hadn't accepted Hannibal's help with Clover.

And then the moment passes and Will knows he'll keep following after Hannibal like a loyal dog. He follows the psychiatrist inside and sits unceremoniously on the floor in the middle of the living room -what he's sure Hannibal calls the *parlor*. He drags Winston into his lap, the sweet dog going easily and letting him bury his face into soft fur. Very firmly, he does *not* think about burying his face into Hannibal's shoulder or chest.

Ugh, he thought you were supposed to stop having ridiculous crushes when you were a teenager. He's in his 30s, for fucks sake.

Hannibal doesn't join him for some time, but when he does, he sets a mug of what smells like very strong hot chocolate on the coffee table. Wordlessly, he takes his place on one of the armchairs, mug of his own in hand and Clover on his lap.

"Drink, Will. You'll feel better," he assures gently.

“I feel fine,” he argues just to be contrarian, but reaches to pick up the mug and take a sip. It’s really good, but he isn’t that surprised. Good enough that Will doesn’t even mind the way sugar and chocolate stick to the backs of his teeth and makes him want to brush them clean. “Thank you. I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

"I have practice when it comes to cleaning," Hannibal retorts, just to have the last word. He stays quiet for a moment, looking at nothing as he thinks. "I have told you before, Will. I see nothing wrong in you being yourself. I can only hope you allow me to help you, should the need arise."

Will wrinkles his nose. He wonders if Hannibal would think the same if he’d known him years ago. He’s a mess now, and that’s *after* training himself out of bad habits like biting bruises into his hands and wrists during stressful cases and ripping his nails off with his teeth until his fingers bled because he’d spent just too long in a too-full room. Hell, *he* doesn’t even like it when he’s himself, half the time. If there was ever an upside to being a mirror for everyone, it was that there was almost always the option to be someone else for a bit.

“I really don’t understand you, Hannibal,” Will tells the man, blunt but honest.

Hannibal hums, an amused little sound, and replies with a smile, "I know."

Smug little shit.

Chapter End Notes

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter! We’ll see you next time!

This fic will likely be updating only once a month for the foreseeable future but we promise not to drop an unexpected hiatus on you.

almost (sweet music)

Chapter Summary

I got some color back
She thinks so, too
I laugh like me again
She laughs like you

Chapter Notes

I'm posting this from my deathbed, fading away as I type… aka Bones is posting this chapter while stuck at work with a painful and hellish cold from hell, lmao. A shorter chapter today, but a very sweet filler. The boys are cute and need to get together already but alas. **-Bones**

I suffer from sleepy bitch disease but I finally forced myself through another chapter to be able to bring you this. PRAISE ME!!! /j **-Salty**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal notices more things than the average person, but he knows he doesn't see the world Will does. It's interesting, not amusing, to watch Will rattled as he is. For some reason he isn't sure he can describe, it makes him uncomfortable.

Where he would watch anyone else with morbid curiosity, trying to prick the fragile shell keeping them together, he's found himself genuinely concerned for his friend. An odd feeling, new certainly, and he wasn't sure where to place it exactly.

So, deciding to use his veil of domestication for something more than just deception, he stays by the man's side the morning after. Hannibal finds he has to force himself not to stare intently for too long, but still manages to steal glances as he cooks.

Will looks far too haggard to be healthy, tapping his fingers against the countertop without a steady rhythm and barely managing five minutes between checking his phone. There is, of course, something oddly beautiful in his distress, the mournful face of Botticelli's Angel of the Annunciation come to life in his dining room. And yet, the image is still disquieting as Will's shoulders sag as if he's barely able to keep himself from collapsing and resting his head against the counter.

It's not a look he likes on the man much at all.

Hannibal plates a larger breakfast consisting of mostly sausages from his last pork, with a portion of potatoes and sets it in front of the young man. "Eat, Will."

The empath winces, staring at the food, and for a moment he expects Will to push away the plate and say he's not hungry. It's the kind of rudeness he'd only tolerate from him. To his surprise, Will picks up his fork and does begin to eat, albeit slowly. After a sluggish bite of sausage, he says, apropos of nothing, "Alana said they're moving Abigail to a different facility. Out of state."

It's a good idea, he thinks, setting a hand on Will's shoulder. *But one he must despise*.

After all, Will is clearly haunted by Garrett Jacob Hobbs's shade. He wants to dig the worm out of there, but his dear Will isn't ready yet. "You should do something relaxing, Will. I could always come with you."

His friend looks up at him, a wry smile bordering on mischievous pulling across his face. "Yeah? Think you'll keep saying that after finding out what I do for relaxation? Not really your type of thing, I don't think," Will says, pointedly looking him up and down. There's his dear boy's bite, how lovely to see it again.

"Just spending time with you is enjoyable enough," he replies, knowing full well Will usually gets flustered at such honesty. He takes his hand away slowly to savor the curve of the man's shoulder before he returns to cooking. "Now will you tell me even if you think I'd be loath to do it?"

The slight hitch of breath he gets as he returns to the stove is delightful. Will is so clearly touch starved that it's honestly a wonder he's as stable and functional as he is. There's a moment of silence before Will clears his throat, "Fishing. Fly fishing, where you stand in the actual river as you fish."

Not ideal, but definitely something he could watch Will do. He'd want to do more than watch, of course, but he could find it in himself to draw while his dear friend relaxed. "Drawing by the river certainly sounds better than staying inside, don't you agree?"

"Of course you'd say that," Will laughs as he shoves another bite of his breakfast into his mouth, but the fondness drips heavily from his voice and the smile he gives Hannibal is lighter than any expression he's made so far this morning. "Alright, you can come fishing with me, but you're in charge of my tackle box. I'll even let you name a lure."

There's clearly a meaning, a weight, there that he doesn't know. But from the look he earns as his dear friend says it, he knows he wants to know. Perhaps he'll have to look up the answer for himself, or perhaps Will would tell him if he asks.

He plates his own breakfast before sitting next to Will and looking at him properly again. "And what would make a good name," he decides to ask. Telling Will to be himself would be useless if he doesn't give the younger man the chance he needs to do just that.

"Name it after someone you love," Will says promptly, eyeing his hairline. "That's how the superstition goes. You name a lure after someone you love and if they love you back, you

catch the fish. It’s silly, but I like the sentiment of it.”

"Hm, then I may already have a name in mind." Yes, *Will* would be a suitable name. But he can't tell the empath that, so, a white lie it is. "Mischa."

“Mischa?” his friend asks, curiosity creeping into his voice as he turns to better face Hannibal. “You’ve never mentioned the name before.”

"I tend not to," Hannibal replies, looking back to his plate. No, Mischa has always been too good to share with anyone. But he knows Will wouldn't try to mar the image of her he remembered. "She was my sister, lovely thing really."

Will closes his eyes, reminiscent of the way he does at crime scenes. Hannibal wonders what he’s envisioning, what runs through his mind. When he opens his eyes, there’s the dazed look he always has for a few seconds after sinking into his empathy. It sticks around a bit longer, the way Will blinks syrupy slow and as sweet a sight to see.

“Yeah,” he says as he shakes his head to clear it, voice just ever so slightly thick at first, “Was she younger? I bet you were protective of her- it would fit you.”

Hannibal could spend eternity watching him and it would still be over too soon, if he's honest. "Not protective enough. I've learned since."

And he has. Now he knows to get what he wants before it can be taken from him.

Will swallows, finally looking away from him and picking at his breakfast again. “Okay. Mischa. That’s a good name for a lure.”

Hannibal watches him eat with a pleased and amused huff before depositing another piece of meat into the younger man's plate from his own. It wouldn't do for Will to go without proper nourishment, after all, and Hannibal does so enjoy feeding the empath.

He eats his own breakfast, thoughts idling away as the morning follows through. Before long, he finds himself in the passenger side of his Bentley, Clover on his lap, snoring softly. His favorite classical radio is on as Will drives them off to his home.

Hannibal enjoys these moments of quiet bonding, comfortable in his loosened flesh suit next to Will. Effervescent in his tiredness, Hannibal can only imagine the glow of the halo crowning the empath's head, but he is certain it must be there. Should he be hallowed by his Becoming, Will shall certainly glow with the blood staining his hands.

He's a lovelier creature than Hannibal, really.

“You might still get wet,” Will warns him suddenly, apropos of nothing. He’s tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and if there’s a rhythm there, it’s not one Hannibal recognizes. “Just so you know. I always take the dogs down to the river with me and some of them like to play in the shallows. So, uh, sorry in advance if you get sprayed by them shaking off.”

Hannibal gets the overwhelming urge to squeeze and bite the younger, so he snorts as he turns away. “Good thing I know how to go to the drycleaners’, then.”

It’s adorable how he worries.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. See if I try and keep the dogs from swarming you,” Will grumbles, as if he can’t see the pleased glow of contentment hovering in the corners of his face. He turns the car away from the city streets and down the winding country road that will lead into Wolf Trap. “We’ll have to stop by the house first. For the dogs, obviously, but I need to change and get my gear, too.”

It’s good to see Will relax already, better yet to take his mind off of things. It’s very tempting to keep him trapped in his house or the river, so he can remain as content as this. But it wouldn’t help him with his real goal, so Hannibal lets the thought go, as entertaining as it is.

“I’m certain I can help corale the dogs while you change, Will,” he assures, looking out the window at their familiar surroundings with a pleased sigh. Yes, this would be better than rushing Will through the entire process. After all, he was very close to isolating the man away from Jack and Alana already. He enjoys that fact more than anything else.

Will looks at him briefly, squinting suspiciously, before turning back to the road with a knowing, “Don't give them too many treats, you’ll ruin their diet.”

Clever boy.

Soon, they’re turning down Will’s long driveway and he watches the tension start to slip from his dear friend’s shoulders as he parks. He supposed he sees the charm in living somewhere so isolated, and it’s truly a lovely sight, but Hannibal does not think he could feel so content here. He doesn’t think he could handle frigid winters so removed from the sounds and presence of teeming life. But it's equally impossible to not watch the ease with which Will emerges from the car and heads to his front door to let his merry pack swarm him.

Hannibal follows him out, smiling when Clover manages to escape from his door somehow. Just as clever as Will, most likely. He lets Winston out just as Will opens his door and watches them all happily run to and from his dear friend. Clearly trying to incite him to play with them after being away for a few days, they barely pay Hannibal any mind.

It’s better this way, because Will is smiling and beautiful in the sunlight.

There’s an itch to capture this moment, not just as another memory in his mind palace, but to freeze the world entirely. To stop the earth’s rotation as Will kneels to pet and greet his family and pay no attention to anyone or anything as he presses kisses to each dogs’ forehead. And then Will looks up at him and raises an eyebrow, beckoning him closer with the tilt of his head, and if heaven exists then it must be this.

“Come here,” his dear boy commands, standing and brushing dust from his knees as he walks inside the house. He leaves the front door open to let the dogs filter in and out as they please, and oh how Hannibal covets him. Will already looks better, less plagued by the day before, as he leads him to the desk in the main room. He opens a tackle box and runs loving fingertips across small feathers and bundles of hair. “Pick my first lure. Mischa. I’m going to go get dressed.”

But Will lingers, waits to see what he will pick.

Right, *Mischa*. Hannibal doesn't need a lure to know his precious sister loved him just as much as he does her. *Will* is a more fitting name, so much so he picks one that appears to have a peacock tail feather, reflective green eye and all. "I quite enjoy this one here."

Will stares at it, a smile pulling at his mouth. "You would," he says, sounding fond. He turns and disappears up the stairs to the part of the house rarely used and leaves Hannibal alone in mostly silence. He can still hear the other man, though.

His footsteps rain down from above as he dresses, at one point accompanied by a sharp, loud *shit!* and a clatter. He can't help the smile that steals across his face.

Hannibal fits into his life so easily that sometimes Will has to sit down and breathe through the terror. He's intimately familiar with the hedgehog's dilemma and has been since he learned about it in a college Intro to Psych class. But when Hannibal is downstairs in his house as he changes into the comforting weight of his fishing waders and heavy, waterproof boots, it feels worth it.

It feels worth it when he heads downstairs to grab the key for his little barn and watches Teddy sniff at Hannibal's pockets before flopping, disappointed, in front of the empty hearth. It feels worth it when he sees the lure his friend had picked, stunning green and blue and an incredibly lucky find. He wonders if the older man knows he picked it up in his neighborhood, in a rich Baltimore not-quite-suburb. Will doesn't think he does, but it's funny to imagine.

He clears his throat, "We have to stop by the barn to grab my fishing gear, if you're ready. Buster keeps trying to eat my line if I keep it in the house."

As if agreeing, the little menace of a chihuahua barks when he hears his name. Will looks down at the tiny dog chasing loops around his feet with exasperation.

"Buster," Hannibal calls and the little dog, surprisingly or maybe not so much, heads right to Hannibal and sits. Hannibal looks up at Will with a sly smile. "Your father said no treats, unfortunately. You go out first, Will, we'll follow."

"You're not allowed to feed my dogs anymore, you spoil them," Will says as if he doesn't devote half his day taking care of his pack sometimes, the threat ringing hollow. He picks up the tackle box and heads back out into the gentle chill with a sharp whistle to call the dogs to heel.

The detour to gather the rest of his gear and a folding camping chair is short and then he's leading the dogs and Hannibal down a well-worn path into the woods. Fall has settled properly over them, towering evergreens spotted with yellow and orange trees sending leaves and needles drifting down to them as they walk. There's a route to drive to a different part of the river, where other fishermen sometimes gather, but Will likes this path best. His own private stretch of river.

He glances over his shoulder to watch Hannibal follow him, surrounded by the animals Will loves more than himself and the chair he'd shoved into his arms in hand. As inconvenient as his little crush on his best friend is, the blistering warmth digging through his veins and muscle whisper that it was probably inevitable.

Even when it makes his skin prickle, when Hannibal's presence digs into Will's skin like tiny knives, it's moments like these that make it hard to resent it. He thinks he was always going to be drawn to the psychiatrist, no matter the universe.

Hannibal arches a brow at him when he notices Will looking, only offering a curious smile. And, always such a pleasant surprise, his friend asks something unexpected, "When was the last time you had a chance to do this, Will?"

He has to think about it as he sets down his tackle box and plucks the lure Hannibal had chosen for him out of it. *Mischa*, he thinks, turning it over in the light. The glint of green is so bright that it blinds him for a moment. He ties it to his line with quick, sure hands.

"Must've been before Jack," he finally responds as he starts to wade into the river. It's bitingly cold, even through his insulated and water repellent clothing, but it's refreshing. Fall is ushering in winter fast, but it's not too late in the season for fishing. "When he pulled me into the Hobbs case. I'd gone fishing not long before then. Haven't had the time since."

Or the energy, but if Will is honest and says that, he knows Hannibal will frown at him. It's concern, he knows, but he doesn't want to ruin the nice atmosphere.

He hears the sound of Hannibal setting up the chair and pulling what sounds like a sketchbook out of the bag he'd brought along. "Should we make a habit of this, then?"

If it had been anyone, Will might have bristled at the offer of closeness, of *routine* with someone else. But Hannibal asks so eagerly, and so kindly, that it's hard not to look at him, not to try and peer in and see.

And, well… it's Hannibal. Who has very quickly become an exception to most of Will's rules.

"Yes," he says without bothering to think through all the implications that his easy response could carry. Of all the people to judge him, his friend is easily the last. He casts his line and continues, "I'd like that."

"Good," Hannibal replies, sounding far too pleased about it. The sound of pencil on paper rings out in the quiet around them before the dogs start scattering around playfully. "I'll make sure to keep free time on my schedule."

As he recasts his line, Will finds himself admitting, "I don't do much outside of work that isn't spending time with you. You can have all my free time."

That seems to render Hannibal speechless. For a moment, Will can only hear the sound of his dogs happily playing and jumping into the river around but feels the weight of Hannibal's curious eyes on him.

Embarrassment rolls in and leaves him feeling transparent even as Will feels a bite on his line and starts reeling it in. He refuses to even try swallowing the words back down, but he can't make himself look at Hannibal either. Because, as much as it pains him, he'd been honest.

Hannibal Lecter could interrupt his day and bother him every day, no matter how much, and he thinks he still wouldn't be able to hate the man for it. He'd hated people for less in the past, but-

(Even if pressed, he could not pinpoint the moment that the other man became such a part of his life that he couldn't imagine him not there. Or rather, he could but he didn't *want* to. He didn't want to think about what would be of him if he didn't have Hannibal there to anchor him at scenes.)

(The truth is: Will knows exactly what would happen without Hannibal. He remembers when Alana and Jack had ambushed him, so well-meaning but so intent that it felt sharp and pointed. And if Hannibal hadn't walked in, he knows he would have given up and let them impale him on their pikes.

He has an unfortunate habit of caving under pressure. Hannibal, with a steel spine, has always helped him weather the pressure. Without him, he would fall like a house of cards.)

Hannibal is always his exception.

"I don't know why you're surprised," Will says in a pale attempt to mitigate the disaster of his own words, "You're my friend. My closest friend. I like spending time with you."

"Less surprised about that, more surprised that you would sacrifice your time alone so much," Hannibal replies, and the pressure of his eyes go away as if they had never been boring into him. "I should get you a spare key, in that case." The ease with which he says it is intense and feels like a warm coat being draped across his shoulders; comfortable and heavy.

Will finishes reeling in a nicely sized trout, though his head might as well still be spinning on the spool. He makes his way to the shore as he digests that, using the folding knife he keeps clipped to his waders to slice through the fishing line. He sets the fish in the cooler he brought for the purpose and then grabs his tackle box and holds it out to Hannibal.

"Pick another lure," he demands to give himself time. Watching him search carefully through the box, he licks his lips and rocks back on his heels as he finally finds the words he was looking for.

"Spending time with you isn't like spending time with other people. You don't- You're not emotionless. But you keep them behind a- a veil, or a window pane, or something. They don't… spill everywhere. I don't feel suffocated by what you feel and think, when I'm around you. I like being alone. But I don't mind being alone with you, too."

Hannibal plucks a brilliant gold, bumble bee looking lure out of the box and holds it up for Will to judge, looking at him like he might be able to dissect his words apart and keep them all for himself. His friend has always been a bit greedy when it comes to affection. With

amusement practically raining from his words, he asks, playfully, “Would you prefer I bark, Will?”

Will laughs, loud and so blisteringly honest it makes his throat sting with it. But he finds he doesn’t mind it much at all. He takes the lure from Hannibal, tying it right then and there with deft hands. Even when the soft, frequent tremor he always seems to have is worse than normal, he thinks he could still tie a lure to a pole with his eyes shut.

“I think we’ll name this one Nina,” he tells his friend, watching the lure catch in the autumn sunlight. His old girl always had loved bees- trying to eat them, at least.

“Nina?” Hannibal asks, smiling warmly. And, with an understanding that absolutely no one else will possibly ever possess, he looks at the lure again and asks, “An old dog?”

“My first love,” Will agrees, an old inside joke he doesn’t share with anyone outside of Louisiana anymore. “You would have loved her, I think. She was the biggest baby known to man.”

“Aren’t you afraid I would have pampered her too much?” His friend jokes, going back to his art with a pleased little smile. He looks peaceful; content to wait and watch for Will, to choose the lures and share names and time. He’d offered up his spare key like it meant nothing- or maybe everything -to him.

Hannibal Lecter is a man with a soft, pliable heart. His coldness, the veil he hides behind, all of it- it can’t hide that simple fact from him.

He shrugs and pets Winston when the dog comes to nose at his hip, “She would have deserved it, especially at the end there. She passed away a couple years ago.”

Turning, he wades back into the river. He’s just as content to keep fishing while they talk, enjoying the way that both the familiar act and Hannibal’s presence soothe him. He can hear him over the river and the dogs and that’s all he needs, really. He’s never needed to watch and gauge his friend while they talked, not like he had to with other people.

After all, Hannibal himself had told Will he didn’t find anything wrong in him. That he didn’t need to pretend around him.

“She was happy,” Hannibal assures with an unshakable certainty. The fact he knows that she loved Will, that Will loved her and still loves her, is something the older man doesn’t even question or judge. Everything that his friend does is just more proof that he meant it, as well. It feels good to let go of it all with him.

Will smiles- grins, really. He casts his line, closing his eyes to commit the scene to memory. Hannibal, in his shitty old camping chair, drawing with Buster, Zoe, and Clover all sniffing around his feet to avoid water too high for their little bodies. The rest of dogs wandering and splashing about, playing with each other and occasionally bumping into the backs of his legs. The water rushes around him steadily, calmly.

This, he knows with certainty, is what he'll be imagining every time he needs to slip away to somewhere peaceful. Somewhere happy, safe.

Chapter End Notes

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter! We'll see you next time! In a month or perhaps sooner, who knows.
(and to moteitbe, we see and love you. we have an offer for you and you can reach out to me for our discords on my tumblr at necrotic-bones-fic if you're interested)

nina cried power

Chapter Summary

it's not the song, it is the singin'
it's the heaven of the human spirit ringin'
it is the bringin' of the line

Chapter Notes

I'M ON VACATION BITCHEEESSSS!! **-Salty**

Posting this head empty, no thoughts, only *shakes fist at guests*. Please enjoy **-Bones**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal enjoys their new routine, their new ‘normal’ really. He enjoys waking up with Will right there and Winston staying on the ground by the bed for him, or Clover waiting by the door to follow the older man out and down the stairs to his yard.

It would be remiss of him to lie about it all, especially if Will were to be in earshot. Thankfully, or to his frustrations, perhaps, no one knows how close he’s managed to become to the professor. His dogs are a joy to be around, even if Hannibal *does* pamper them more than his friend would enjoy, and Will’s general companionship is something he feels greedy and selfish over.

Will is his, even if the man doesn’t know it yet. Hannibal could feed him his still-beating heart but he knows that alone wouldn’t explain the connection they share, certainly not to the rest of the world. But he still hates the way Alana speaks of his dear Will as if she knows everything there could be to know about him. Or how Jack keeps pushing his envelope, pushing Will to the edge of a precipice Hannibal cannot ignore.

He doesn’t stay in bed to watch Will wake up, hasn’t done so since the first time he’d accidentally caught sight of it. He knows Will doesn’t enjoy being disorientated so much and having to deal with human interaction so soon. It’s different than when he examines a crime scene and, though curious, he can ignore it for the sake of their friendship.

What he is honestly more surprised by, when he’s nearing completion of their breakfasts, is a ring at the door. Clover growls at his feet, hackles raised, and Hannibal cannot blame her for doing exactly as she was taught by his friend. He picks up the little retriever, after setting everything aside, and goes to the front door before whoever it is can possibly wake Will.

He pauses at the door, surprised. “Dr. Bloom,” he greets. “Too early for it to be a personal visit, I take it?” He steps aside so the other psychiatrist can come in, a bit confused by her arrival. Especially since he isn’t exactly dressed for visitors.

“There’s no need to be so professional, Hannibal,” Alana laughs as she steps in, taking off her coat to hold it over her arm. “We’re friends, aren’t we? But you would be correct, this isn’t a social call.”

She follows him back into his kitchen, pausing to think her words through. Distantly, Hannibal can hear the sound of a door closing upstairs, though he doubts she can. “I tried to stop by Will’s place but he must have taken the dogs out early,” she says, and he watches her eye the two plates he’s preparing curiously, “I came to tell you that Abigail Hobbs woke up. Do you need a hand? It wouldn’t be the first time I was your sous chef.”

“I don’t,” Hannibal shuts her down kindly, with a smile. “How long has she been awake? I am certain Jack Crawford would like to bully a confession out of the poor thing.”

He looks at her better, hates the way she had so easily mentioned his friend, like Will’s name belonged in her mouth. “Meaning you must have seen her before. Why are you really here, Alana?”

“Not for long. She woke up last night. And I’m here to talk to you about it. Coffee?” she asks, only to be stopped in her tracks by the sound of Will’s feet trodding down the stairs. “Ah, do you have a guest? I’m sorry, we-”

“Hannibal?” Will calls out as he rounds the corner into the kitchen, looking beautifully mussed and soft from sleep. He’s wearing his own white shirt, one of the ones worn from sleep and repeated washing, and a pair of Hannibal’s silk sleep pants. He’s never seen his dear friend sleep in pants before, other than the first time he had stayed the night, and the sight sends a mild shock through his system.

Rubbing his eyes, glasses nowhere in sight, he asks, “Who are you talking t- Alana? What are you doing here?”

The way he asks it reminds Hannibal of Clover, earlier, growling and protective, like this is *Will’s* domain. It’s not a bad thought.

“Alana was telling me about Abigail,” he explains, setting the plates on his side of the island, to try and make the other doctor feel a bit more isolated. “I do have a guest, however, seeing as you were looking for him first, I’ll prepare coffee.”

Not that he *wants* to, but his dear Will is going to need it, and would have even if she hadn’t shown her face here. It has become increasingly difficult for him to be kind to her. At least she hasn’t worn out her usefulness yet.

“Will is your guest? Isn’t that a bit…” Alana begins, only for Will to swiftly cut her off as he settles into his usual seat.

“Abigail? Is she okay?” he asks in a rush, a frown marring the softness of his face in the sweet morning. The concerned timber of his voice must have roused Winston from his doze in front of the fire in Hannibal’s foyer, seeing as the dog trots in and heads right for his beloved owner. In any other situation, he wouldn’t allow the dogs in the kitchen, but Winston has always been exceptionally well behaved.

And, of course, there is the fact that his mere presence settles Will.

“Jack’s been trying to call you about it,” Alana says, measured and slightly pointed, “You haven’t picked up. He wants you to go see her.”

Hannibal places a cup of coffee, just how Will likes it, in front of his dear friend. The empath shrugs as he takes a sip and says honestly, “I don’t remember where I left my phone last night. It’s either in the library or the study, I think. You don’t think I should see her, then?”

“Jack likely wants the girl to confess to something,” Hannibal points out, sliding Will’s plate over to him. He takes a moment to prepare a cup of coffee for Alana, but doesn’t put much effort into it other than handing it to the doctor. “It seems she may not want me to go either.”

And then, because he can’t seem to forget about her words, Hannibal chuckles lightly. Playfully, like he’s trying to joke with her, he asks, “Were you going to say Will being here as a guest is unprofessional, Alana? We’ve been friends longer than we’ve worked together, by now.”

Her pinched face at that fact is everything Hannibal needed to know. If she thinks she can have access to his Will, she is thoroughly mistaken.

“Jack believes she was an accomplice to her father’s crimes, yes,” she acknowledges, wincing when Will’s face turns and twists into something derisive, unapproving. “I don’t mean to get in the middle of you and Jack, nor *stop* you from seeing her, but- Perhaps the first person Abigail talks to about what happened can't be anyone who was there when it happened.”

“Abigail doesn't have anyone,” Will says and it’s a wonder how firm and sure he sounds, so much more settled than he had been when he learned of her transfer. “She needs someone to be there for her.”

“Will, you can’t- When I said what I was going to say in my head, it sounded really insulting, so I'm going to find another way to say it,” Alana sighs, stepping close enough to Will to rest a hand on his bare forearm. A fire starts to burn in his chest when she doesn’t release her hold even at the small flinch it earns.

“Say it the insulting way,” he says, leaning away from her. Hannibal can’t help but wonder how she doesn’t hear the bite, the warning as he tries to shift away from the hand that follows him.

“Dogs keep a promise a person can't.”

In one fluid movement Hannibal steps up and gently takes Alana's hand off of his friend, stepping into her space enough that she backs up a few steps. "We are both very well-aware that Miss Abigail Hobbs is a human being, Dr. Bloom," he warns, shielding Will from her with a polite smile, the one he can muster. He leans in close to whisper, just loud enough for his dear Will to hear and yet have deniability, "We are also both *very* aware that Will hates being touched. Aren't we?"

Alana steps back, a small frown on her perfectly painted lips; Hannibal's attention is much more centered on the slow, gentle way Will leans forward to rest his head between his shoulder blades.

"We're friends," she says, a paper thin defense, "I didn't think it ma- I didn't see why it wouldn't be fine. It was, wasn't it?"

"Ah, well-" Will begins, a hesitant and unsure answer that Hannibal can feel against his spine. "We're friends, I guess, but you haven't been in a room alone with me before. I was under the assumption that there are certain, um, boundaries you didn't want to cross, and-"

Hannibal gently reaches back to set a hand on Will's side comfortingly. "Alana, are you not the one who helped Agent Crawford *ambush* Will? And tried to be his psychiatrist? Surely you *must* know better."

Oh, he knows Will enjoys her company when she allows him to have it, but Hannibal would never have let her near Will again after such an event. He could be cruel, meaner, but he decides to calm himself instead. It wouldn't do to scare Will so early in the morning.

"Drink your coffee, Alana. I can prepare some breakfast for you while you tell us how Abigail is fairing."

Alana drifts further away, a scolded mein to her face as she sits on the opposite side from Will. Taking a sip of her coffee, she admits, "She's asked to see you both."

"But you still don't think it's a good idea," Will scoffs, dry and scornful but finally eating his breakfast to Hannibal's immense pleasure. He seems to have finally settled enough for this, good. He does so worry about the man's eating habits when he isn't around. "If she's asking to see us, Alana, I don't see what the issue is."

"The problem is that you killed her father, Will!" Alana says, sharp and almost reprimanding, but not wholly unkind. That is her only saving grace.

"Her father, or the man who would have slaughtered her?" Hannibal asks, making a new plate for his new, woefully uninvited guest. "She may be 17 and yet a child, but children respond to their parents' emotions. Do you truly think she will remember a loving man, or the man who slit her throat, Alana?"

She stays quiet for a moment at that, sipping her coffee. "Trauma is more complex than that," she responds, and she is right.

“But would you not want to see the people who saved your life, once you woke up?” He directs the question more at Will than herself, but his colleague has never been good at reading him, or Will for that matter.

“She’s a kid, who has been through a deeply traumatic situation. You don’t know how she’ll react,” Alana points out, almost gently, “She is also *my* charge; I am the one responsible for her mental well being for the duration of this case. And I’m saying she’s not ready to be questioned about it.”

“Well then,” Will says, sounding almost smug. He stands and brings his empty plate over to the sink to set it down before refilling his mug and giving Alana and Hannibal both a wry smile. “It’s good we have no intent to see her in an official capacity, isn’t it? She asked for me personally- for us- and I’m not just going to ignore that and not go see her.”

Hannibal chuckles in agreement, setting a fresh breakfast in front of Alana. “Neither am I, it would be rather rude.” He grabs his own plate and hands it to Will, appetite gone. “After all, Jack has not reached either of us yet, either.”

It would be impossible not to feel something akin to pride in watching Will dig into a second plate, leaning his hip up against the counter of the breakfast island. He pretends he doesn’t see his friend slip a sausage to Winston at his side.

“Not for a lack of trying,” Alana points out dryly.

“He shouldn’t expect me to have my phone on me at all times. I could be fishing, or in an area without service, or sleeping. Like I was this morning. Jack should remember that I’m a consultant, Alana, not an agent,” Will only shrugs, swallowing another mouthful to tack on, “And so is Hannibal. Actually- how did you become a consultant?”

Hannibal tilts his head in Alana’s direction slightly. He sees no reason to keep this a secret from Will, so he explains, “Alana told me she thought her friend, whom Agent Crawford initially wanted to recruit, was too delicate for this work. She told Crawford about me, and I agreed.”

He does not, however, expect the way Will winces and stops eating. He’s silent and still for a long enough moment that Winston nudges his thigh. Finally, looking distinctly uncomfortable, he says, “Wow, uh… Hope that’s not still your opinion of me, Alana. Considering my job.”

The weak attempt at a joke may as well slap him in the face with all its implications.

He looks to Alana, wide eyed in surprise. Not many things surprise him anymore, but for her to have called Will *fragile* of all things? The way her face pales and her motions pause yet no answer comes, makes him look back at Will, gauging the situation.

“Right, well,” his dear Will sets the plate down, only half finished, and shifts to stand properly. “This conversation has been, uh, illuminating, but I’m going to- put real clothing on. At least I put pants on this morning.”

The last part is muttered, but Alana clearly still hears him, because she chokes on her coffee, “I’m sorry, you- what? Hannibal, that is entirely-”

Will has already hurried from the room, his sweet mutt following close behind him, before she can finish. It’s an impulse that he completely understands, even if he cannot indulge in it, too.

“Whatever you were going to say, Alana, matters very little,” Hannibal finally snaps politely, motioning for her to stand not-so-politely. “You are intruding into *my* home where what me and *my* guests do is, very honestly, none of your concern.”

He guides her towards the door, a hand firmly on her back. His patience and good nature as a host has finally worn thin, now that he’s been able to gather his needed information.

“Have a safe trip home, Dr. Bloom,” he says, opening the door to gently and politely push her out before closing it without awaiting a reply. After a moment of hesitation, he makes sure to lock it for good measure.

He has more important things to deal with, namely; Will.

Will had known, since only the second time they had met, that Alana was unsettled by him. It hadn’t been much of a surprise; in his experience, he’d found that there was a surprisingly small pool of people that he didn’t unnerve. But he’d been sure that she liked him, despite it. They respected each other, conversation hadn’t been too hard or awkward, and Alana never brought up his empathy first or unprompted. He even thinks that, had he not met Hannibal that fateful morning in the field, he might have had a bit of a crush on her.

It was new, for someone to be both uncomfortable around him and his mannerisms, and yet still try to be his friend. It had been… nice, pleasant even.

The revelation that her recommendation, her opinion of him, was that he was too fragile tastes like ash in his mouth. For all that it feels like an unexpected slap to the face - or perhaps a knife in his back would be more accurate - Will still can’t quite begrudge her for it. Alana has always been kind to him, well intentioned. He knows, with certainty, that in her mind it had simply been her way of protecting him.

But the knowledge still doesn’t soften the blow that someone he had considered a friend - someone who had been aware of his distaste for being called such things - thought him brittle, breakable. It would feel like a betrayal, but Will can’t help but think he hadn’t actually trusted her all that much either.

He’s quiet as Hannibal drives them north towards Maine, Winston and Clover curled on top of each other in the backseat. He fiddles with his phone, not opening any of the missed messages and voicemails from Jack, but simply staring at it to have something to do with his hands. The morning had started out so pleasantly and as thrilled as he is to know that Abigail is awake and alright, he wishes Alana hadn’t shown up to crash breakfast.

He sighs, putting his phone away. There's no use in moping about it, now.

Hannibal reaches over to gently put his hand on the back of Will's neck. His hand, calloused and warm, is better than how Alana's had felt on his skin that morning. "I'm sure she'll be happy to see us, Will."

He wonders how Hannibal always seems to know exactly what to say. Maybe he's just blatantly transparent when it comes to his friend. The thought makes something warm and heavy ache softly in his chest. He leans back into that broad palm, humming.

"She did ask for us," he agrees easily, "That's not what I'm worried about, I guess. I- I'm worried about *her*. She has nothing left, Hannibal. I can't help but feel… responsible for that, I guess."

"In that case," Hannibal starts confidently, "she has us. It would *not* be the first time law enforcement adopts a child in a case they were involved in." He squeezes gently, just enough to ease part of a growing headache. "Do you truly think I won't help? I'm as responsible for her as you are."

Hannibal has always liked to tease him, despite being so-called polite. If they weren't friends, he might take it as an insult.

"She's nearly 18, she'll most likely be declared an emancipated minor- if she's even released from the care facility before her birthday," Will points out. He doesn't want to imagine what it would be like, to finally become an adult but still be stuck somewhere without complete agency. Even thinking about it makes his hands go cold. "We don't actually know her, she doesn't know us. What if she doesn't want us around?"

It's hard to remember, sometimes, that he has never had a conversation with Abigail Hobbs. It's a side effect of his empathy, of spending too much time in the mind of Garett Jacob Hobbs while trying to catch him, he knows. But there's still a pale imitation of love and understanding that lingers. He doesn't know her, can't possibly love her, but a part of him wants to. A part of him had looked into terrified blue eyes and for what felt like the first time, saw himself.

He can't decide if that means there's something wrong with him, or not.

"Will," Hannibal soothes, voice calm and smooth. "Breathe, please. She is no doubt confused, but do you truly think she would choose to brave the world alone when we can offer support?"

"I'm breathing," he snips, but takes a purposely slow and even breath. Sighing, he admits, "No, I don't. I don't think most people would. I just have no idea what I'm going to say to her when she asks… anything, really."

Hannibal hums softly and takes his hand away to make a turn. "What she needs to hear," he says softly. "And if she asks for the truth… I suppose we'll have to give her that much."

“I guess,” he agrees, sighing. He watches as they approach the facility, a quaint almost idyllic place. A quiet part of him rebels purely at the thought of walking in. Places like this have always unsettled him, always made him feel small and nervous. They all seemed to carry the same ominous air, an implicit threat: *I can make sure you don't leave*.

It doesn’t take long for Hannibal to park, nor for them to go inside to retrieve their visitor passes and directions to Abigail’s room. It’s on the second floor, and Will eyes the soft greens the walls are painted in. A voice, young and soft, drifts down the hallway.

“How did they catch him?”

“A man named Will Graham,” a second woman’s voice answers and Will exchanges a look with Hannibal before speeding up, “Works for the FBI but isn't FBI. He captures insane men because he can think like them.”

They turn into the doorway, Will leading the way in. He finds himself face to face with a woman, her features distinctly fox-like and surrounded by a mane of tight, red curls. She smiles at him over her shoulder, pointed and mean, and says, “Because he is insane.”

It takes everything in Will to stay placid, to only stare past her emotionlessly. Perhaps on any other day, at any other time, he could have stood and taken it. But today, her eyes make his skin crawl, carves an itch into his very bones. He wants to lash out, he wants to ask her *do you want to see what insane really looks like?*

He wants to do something horrible, something animal, with teeth and nails and wailing.

Instead, Will bites it all back to simply scowl at her and step into the room. “Would you excuse us, please?” he says, sharp and more of a command than question. He turns to Abigail and offers, gentler, “My name’s Will Graham. It’s good to see you awake.”

Hannibal steps closer to him, almost between him and this woman, protective as ever without being overbearing.

The woman scowls a little, standing and grabbing something out of her purse. “He didn't get past the screening process. Too unstable,” she says quickly, pulling a card out and offering it. She effectively cuts Hannibal off before he gets anything out, quite rudely, to add, “If you wanna talk.”

“I never went through any screening, because I’m a *teacher*,” Will says scathingly, snatching the card harshly from her gloved hand to stare her down as he tears it into four, neat pieces. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave, Ms. Lounds, on account that you don’t have permission from her legal guardians to be in here.”

Before she can say much more, Hannibal motions her out and closes the door behind her. He turns back to Will and sets a hand on his shoulder, frowning. He whispers, just to be sure he doesn’t worry Abigail, “Will? Do you need a moment?”

“I’m fine,” Will murmurs back, with a small, grateful smile. The well of emotion in his chest can wait a goddamn hour until they finish the visit. He takes a seat in the chair next to

Abigail's bed, giving her an only slightly uncomfortable smile. "Abigail, this is my friend Hannibal Lecter. Do you remember us?"

For the first time since they've entered the room, Abigail sags and droops with relief. "Yes," she says tearfully, reaching for him like he might be the last thing keeping her together. "You're finally here!"

He doesn't panic in the face of her tears by sheer will alone, as much as he'd like to. He'd been a sympathetic crier as a child and it had instilled in him an urge to run at the sight of tears since. He quickly stands and sits on the edge of the bed to pull Abigail into a hug.

"We're here. I'm sorry it took us so long to get to you this morning. You're alright," he soothes, petting a hand through her hair and looking up to Hannibal with eyes wide in mild panic. He hushes her gently when his words make her let out a loud, terrified sob. "Shh, it's okay. You're alright, you're alive."

Hannibal sits behind her and hugs them both close, a hand in Will's hair as the poor girl cries her heart out. "Let it out, Abigail."

And she does, clinging to Will like a lifeline. She tires herself out eventually, quiet and soft, but still doesn't let go, tucked safely against him by now.

He holds her back just as tightly, feeling something click together inside his ribcage. He doesn't know her favorite color, or the name of her best friend, or if she's ever had a pet. But something in him screams that they *know* each other.

When she's finally settled and she lets him go, Will slips his hand into Hannibal's suit jacket to steal the handkerchief he keeps there. He wipes Abigail's face clean with gentle hands, the same way he does when the dogs get sick. She stares at Hannibal as he finishes and folds the handkerchief. He turns to his friend briefly to tuck it back into the inside pocket, before he focuses once more on Abigail.

He offers her a hand, squeezing when she places her hands into his waiting ones. Honestly, he says, "I'm sorry we couldn't save your mother. We did everything we could but she was already gone."

Hannibal pulls back slowly, petting Abigail on the head before standing. "I'll go grab us something to drink," he announces gently.

"Okay," Abigail replies before sadly adding, "And I know. I saw him kill her." She starts shaking, eyes going glassy and distant, rambling almost too quietly. "He was loving right up until the second he wasn't. Kept telling me he was sorry, to just hold still. He was gonna make it all go away."

It was never going to go away now, Will knows, and he suspects that she does as well. They will all carry this for the rest of their lives. He's used to being followed by specters, well aware of the blood on his hands. But he wishes that Abigail never had to learn it, never had to bear the cross or the thorns that come with survival. He can't understand how Jack could look

at a young girl, who's life was ruined by the same monster, and call her so much as *complicit*. An *accomplice*.

"There is nothing wrong with you, not for loving him and not for feeling loved," Will promises, squeezing her hands in reassurance again. "I don't know if your father was really loving or not. That's not something I can decide for you. I don't know if that was really love. But I think that he must have loved you in whatever way he was capable of, because I know that you are no less deserving of love for what he did to you, and to all those girls."

He decides right then and there - looking into watery blue eyes and seeing a reflection of himself, of someone who is just as lost and stranded amongst the world as him - that he will fight Jack on his ridiculous assertion that she was involved. Come hell or high water, he swears, but Abigail Hobbs will not be defined and destroyed by the sins of her father.

Hannibal returns and sets two glasses of water by the table near them. She doesn't let go of Will's hands, sniffling softly. "I'm gonna be messed up. Aren't I?" She sounds so sure about it, it's a bit devastating. Maybe even maddening. The pain Hobbs inflicted on her is crystal clear between the three of them. "I'm worried about nightmares," she admits quietly.

"We'll help you with the nightmares," Hannibal assures, setting his hand on her shoulder for a moment.

"There's no such thing as getting used to what you experienced. It bothers me a lot. I have nightmares most nights," Will admits to her, pulling one hand away to pick up a glass of water and press it into her hand, "You don't get used to them, not really. But you learn how to manage them, how to fall back asleep after. You find the things that help you. And someday, eventually, maybe you'll stop having them as often."

She takes a drink, calms down a bit more, and looks at Will like she's a bit afraid of being alone. "And you guys will still visit?"

"Any time you want," Will promises in an instant, and he knows it's true, that he means it entirely. He will do anything to give her just the slimmest chance at feeling like a normal teenage girl again, he decides. "All you have to do is ask, and we'll do our best to get here."

He knows that Hannibal won't disagree or deny it either, and it makes the warmth in his chest bloom just a little bit more.

"Thank you," she says, taking another drink. "I think I'm gonna sleep for now, thank you for coming to see me."

Hannibal takes the glass from her hands to set it on the nearby bedside table so she can reach it when she wakes up. "Rest well, Abigail. We'll be back soon," he promises.

Will brushes a hand through her hair gently as she lays back down and follows Hannibal out. On impulse, he reaches out to grab at his sleeve, fingertips brushing against the older man's wrist. To his surprise, Hannibal lets him, and he finds himself indescribably grateful.

Will had already been an officer in New Orleans, a couple hours south of the town he'd grown up in before his father started moving them around so much, when Hurricane Katrina hit. He will always vividly remember the destruction the storm had wrought, once proud and tall buildings reduced to nothing but unrecognizable rubble. It had been horrifying, to come back home to it and pick through the wreckage.

He feels like a category five hurricane has hit his head, now that they're out of Abigail's room. There is a cyclone of biting, dangerous feelings running through his head faster than he can process, and it makes him nervous. It puts him on edge, turns him into the walking natural disaster about to turn a room to bloody wreckage. And at the forefront of it all, is a bubbling anger.

Anger at Alana for intruding on his peaceful morning with Hannibal, for not even having the decency to be honest in her words, her view. Anger at Jack, for putting public opinion over the well being of a little girl. Anger for Freddie fucking Lounds, for chasing after someone all the way to the place they're supposed to rest and heal. Anger at the world, for seemingly never letting him have one good day.

And, stupidly, there's a nagging anger at Hannibal, too, for managing to keep so damn calm through it all while all Will's emotions set him on fire and burn him up from the inside like cheap kindling. He needs desperately to just climb into Hannibal's car, maybe even crawl into the back to sit with the dogs until he feels like less of a holy personification of rage and more like a real human again.

Hannibal stops them before the exit and reaches up to fix Will's hair, where he'd previously held him. Quietly, worriedly, he whispers, "She feels like prey in a cage, terrified of everyone but us. She's smart, but I don't think she'll last long here."

"I wouldn't," he agrees just as softly. He turns towards the car, saying, "Let's go, we can talk about how to handle it on the way back."

But - *of fucking course* - they don't get to do that, not as quickly as he'd like. Because Freddie Lounds is leaning up against Hannibal's car. Both dogs are leaning up against the cracked window she stands next to, and Will can't help but wince when he hears Clover barking up a furious storm at Freddie.

Even Winston is growling, he notices with surprise.

Hannibal scowls next to him, could easily stop Clover who has always listened to him best, and yet doesn't. "Perhaps you didn't hear the dogs," he says instead, "but step away from my vehicle if you would."

She ignores Hannibal and completely bypasses him to try and shake Will's hand. "Special Agent Graham. I never formally introduced myself. I'm Freddie Lounds."

Will's lips curl down in disgust as he leans away. Even if he weren't already not fond of shaking hands, he certainly wouldn't touch her. He scoffs, "I know who you are. You should leave, you're upsetting the dogs."

“Please,” she says fake-pleadingly, as if remorse were something she knew about. A fraud. “Let me apologize for my behavior in there. It was sloppy and misguided - and hurtful.”

Hannibal’s hackles rise and Will knows the man enough to know when he’s infuriated. “Miss Lounds. Now is not the time,” he warns.

She continues, heedless of the consequences, “Look, you and I may have our own reasons for being here, but I also think we both genuinely care about what happens to Abigail Hobbs.”

“You told her I was insane,” he says, dry and unimpressed. *Sloppy and misguided*? No, it was calculated and planned and now she was scrambling to smooth over the mess she’d made. Everything about today was giving Will a blinding headache. Before Freddie has a chance to respond, he gives a sharp, short whistle to quiet the dogs down.

Well. Usually, he doesn’t need a verbal command to get the pack to listen, with how well he’d trained them all. Winston, who has seemed intent on surprising him ever since he came home, apparently has other plans. The car door swings open, startling Freddie and surprising Will, and the two dogs race out.

Clover has at least decided that continuous barking is no longer needed, traded for short, high yips as she runs circles around Freddie Lounds feet. Winston, however, had dashed right for him. He stands in front of Will, having bumped up into his legs to stand across him protectively, ears back and teeth bared as he growls.

Will just stares open mouthed, before looking at Hannibal, “Since when could he open the door. I didn’t teach him that- did *you*?”

Hannibal blinks at him, not surprised by Winston’s new trick, but by Will’s ignorance. “Oh, I thought *you* had, I’ve seen him do it before,” he admits, looking at Clover with a smug fondness. “What a smart dog.”

“What are they doing?!” Freddie yelps, and Will can’t help but snort.

“Congratulations, Ms. Lounds, you managed to piss off a hunting *and* herding dog.” Unfortunately, as amusing as it is, he can already practically see the absolute bullshit she could write about him and his dogs. “Winston, heel.”

The effect is instantaneous, as the shepherd stops growling to circle around him, sniffing. Content, Winston noses at his thigh before bodily nudging him, clearly trying to herd Will towards the passenger side of the car. This, he thinks fondly as he smiles down and scratches his dog at his ruff, is why he prefers dogs over people.

Hannibal sighs, but easily calls for Clover, “Clover, please.” The small terrier so happily stops in her tracks and turns to Hannibal, tail wagging. She shoots off towards the man and wiggles happily at his feet until she’s picked up. “Good girl.”

“I think you should leave, Ms. Lounds,” Will says pointedly, letting Winston guide him back towards the passenger’s seat. Opening the door, he lets the shitty day win and bites, “It's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living.”

Hannibal closes the side door the dogs came out of before getting in and keeping Clover on his lap. “Good day, Miss Lounds,” he says sharply before driving them off back to Will’s house.

Hannibal would call the day dangerously tumultuous, if he were honest. His poor Will has been battered left and right by women with no sense of privacy or manners and he’d been in a tight spot to help further than he could.

So, when they return home, he does his best to situate Will in the living room, despite the dogs all begging for attention, and prepare dinner for the man. He can feel eyes digging into him as he pulls Will’s apron on, and it sends a thrill up his back for a moment. The fact of the matter is, he would feed his lovely Will long porc, if they’d been in his own home.

He pulls a fresh fish out of the fridge, however, and looks at Will. “Is this alright?”

Will stares at him for a long moment, looking horribly worn down. He’s sat on the couch, Winston having climbed up to lay across his lap. “Yeah,” he says with a thin, wan smile. “Go crazy. I like getting to watch you cook.”

Hannibal smiles and turns back to keep cooking, but his heart feels like it might jump out of his chest. His dear Will, so perfect and sweet. If it weren’t for the fact that he is not ready for the entire truth of Hannibal’s Being, he might have tried to kiss him by now.

As it stands, he lets the feeling of eyes on his skin dig as much as they want as he cooks. He wonders, every now and then, if this is Will’s favored way to relax; watching Hannibal cook.

(It feels like a heady thing, heavy and hot in his chest, that demands flesh and the taste of everything that is *Will*. It makes him want to dig his claws into Will, into his bones and flesh, to dig out those wonderful lungs, his liver. Keep the heart for last so that he can watch his dear dove’s eyes through it all.

He feels especially static-filled with the need for it.)

Before he realizes how much time has passed, he pulls out the dinner from the over. He turns back to look at Will and his heart skips a beat when he meets the man’s eyes. “It’s ready, Will.”

His friend ushers the dog from his lap and steps into the kitchen. He leans into Hannibal’s side, cheek pressed to his shoulder and eyes half lidded, as he observes the meal. With a small smile curving his lips, Will hums, “It looks good. Thank you, Hannibal. Really.”

Hannibal is a very weak man, even if no one else were to ever know. He wraps his arm around Will, holds him close enough he feels the man would not be able to simply disappear, and closes his eyes. “Of course, Will.”

Will lets out a pleased, almost relieved, sigh and sags against him for a long moment before they sit down to eat. Halfway through the meal, blue eyes meet his and ask, “Can you stay for

a bit?”

And how could Hannibal deny him, his dove with beautiful eyes? He looks back at his plate to avoid spilling too much of his soul to his friend. “Of course, Will. However long you would like me to,” he assures before taking a bite.

“Thank you,” Will says softly, and there’s no trace of his calamitous anger from only so recently. “Today was… generally unpleasant. I’m not ready to be alone yet, I suppose.”

Hannibal can understand; Will has never been good at handling especially confrontational matters. Today was more than Hannibal thought Will would care to handle. “Even with the dogs here?” Because Will doesn’t usually need company to calm down. Fondly, almost preening, he adds, “You flatter me.”

Will must truly be tired, because he doesn’t even snark back. He just shrugs, with a small smile. “Don’t act surprised, you already know I like you.”

He wants to hide himself in Will’s ribcage and live there, lodged against his heart, for the foreseeable future. He smiles and stands, quickly scanning the kitchen. “Alcohol?”

“Top shelf on the left of the stove,” Will instructs. When he returns with a bottle of whiskey, his friend is already waiting with two glasses. He passes them over and, with a coy glance, asks, “Double for me?”

Hannibal sighs but obliges, looking at Will with a raised brow. “Of course,” he answers, handing Will his glass before leading the way back to the living room. He sees the familiar armchair and decides to seat himself, pulling his first two buttons free. “Was there anything you wanted to speak about?”

“Do you think Abigail would enjoy fishing? Maybe she could join us at the river, sometime,” Will muses obligingly, and Hannibal settles in to listen to his friend talk about what seems to be his favorite subject. Perhaps, despite the overall rather annoying day, it will shape up to be a good night.

Chapter End Notes

Let us know what you think by leaving a comment, we hope you enjoyed this chapter! We’ll see you next time!

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